

THE SNOW IS JUST THE START

THE FINAL WINTER



IAIN ROB WRIGHT

THE FINAL WINTER

(Special Edition)

by

Iain Rob Wright

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Wright**

Thrillobytes: bite-sized horror
(2011, *Silk Raven Associates*)

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Published author, Iain Rob Wright, was born in 1984 and lives in Redditch, a small town in the West Midlands, UK, with his loopy cocker spaniels, Daisy and Oscar, his fat old cat, Jess, his many tropical fish, and the love of his life, Sally. Writing is the passion that fills his life during the small periods of time when he isn't cleaning up after his pets.

Horror is his beloved genre, and his many inspirations range from Stephen King and Richard Laymon to J A

Konrath and Brian Keene, as well as a whole host of other twisted minds.

Check out his official website for freebies, news, and updates at:

<http://www.iainrobwright.com>

For Sally

*The reason I get up in the
morning.*

*Now this was the sin of Sodom:
She and her daughters were arrogant,
overfed and unconcerned; they did not
help the poor and needy. They were
haughty and did detestable things
before me. Therefore I did away with
them as you have seen.*

— **Ezekiel 16:49-50**

The first fall of snow is not only

an event, it is a magical event

— **J. B. Priestley**

THE FINAL WINTER

Chapter One

Harry sipped his latest beer while yet another news update flashed across the pub's dusty television. A female reporter appeared onscreen, enveloped by an over-sized pink ski-jacket and covered in snow. "Good evening," she said politely, a slight shiver in her voice. "I'm Jane Hamilton with Midland-UK News. As you can clearly

see, the nineteen-inches of snow Britain has witnessed during the previous 24-hours has left the nation's transportation network in disarray." The camera panned to overlook a deserted motorway. A sky-blue transit van lay overturned and abandoned in its centre; its mystery cargo strewn across – and half-buried by – the snow.

The reporter let out a breath that steamed the air, and then continued. "Major roads have now been closed off and the nation's rail links have been terminated until further notice. Schools are closed, along with nonessential businesses, while hospitals are doing their best to remain open. The current

death toll of weather-related fatalities is now at twenty-seven and feared to rise. Emergency services have set up a helpline in order to assist anyone in serious need and to offer advice on how best to survive the current freezing temperatures. That number is being displayed at the bottom of the screen now.”

Harry shook his head. *How long are they going keep this up? We get it, the weather's bad!*

“Even more concerning,” the television reporter continued, much to Harry’s displeasure, “is the fact that it is currently snowing throughout every

nation of the world.” A multi-coloured map of the earth superimposed itself at the top right of the screen, then slowly turned white to represent the recent snowfall. “From barren deserts to areas of dense rainforest, all have been subjected to unprecedented snowfall, some for the first time in centuries. Never before in recorded history has such an event been known to occur. Certain religious leaders are calling this-”

“Rubbish!” Old Graham, the most elderly regular of The Trumpet pub and lounge, threw his hands up in disgust and shouted in Harry’s direction. “Bloody fear-mongers, that’s what they are. A

little snow and the country trembles at the knees.”

Harry lifted his head away from his half-finished pint and glanced over at the old man. He was pointing to the television mounted to the back wall by a pair of rusted brackets. Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry, what?”

Old Graham huffed. “More nonsense about a few snowflakes bringing the country to a standstill. Your generation can’t cope with anything unless there’s a video on that *youtube* or *myface* to tell you about it!”

Harry glanced at the television

again. The weather was starting to affect the signal and the picture flickered and hissed constantly. The endless evening-news updates had shown locations from around the globe, half-buried by blankets of slush and snow: The Pyramids of Giza ice-capped like Himalayan Mountains, the canals of Venice frozen over like elaborate ice rinks, and Big Ben rising above a snow-covered Westminster like a giant stalagmite.

Harry returned his gaze back to Old Graham. “I agree it’s a bit much, but the fact that it’s snowing everywhere is at least a little odd, don’t you think?”

The old man huffed again, the sound wet and wheezy. “You think Canada or Switzerland are panicking about the weather? This is a heat wave to an Eskimo! All this climate-change, ozone-layer hogwash they’re harping on about is just to scare us, you mark my words, lad.”

Harry thought about it for a moment. According to the news segments throughout the day it had been categorically denied that climate-change could cause such unprecedented weather. Whatever was causing the snow was something else entirely, said the scientists, if only a random occurrence. But whatever the cause,

Harry wasn't about to allow himself to get rattled by media-frenzy and speculation. The freakish weather didn't concern him – nothing much did anymore – and he knew that if he got into a conversation with Old Graham about it he'd be stuck listening to the wrinkled codger's piss-n-vinegar all night. It had happened enough times previously for Harry to learn his lesson about lonely pensioners and their penchant for long-windedness.

Harry swallowed another mouthful of crisp lager and kept his attention on the flickering television screen, but when he looked over again, Old Graham was still gawping at him. Harry sighed

and decided to give in and talk to him. “Bet everything will be back to normal this time next week, huh, Graham?”

“You bet your balls it will.” The old man sidled along the bar towards Harry, arthritic knees clicking with every step. “I’ve lived through worse times than this, lad!”

Harry rolled his tired eyes. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I used to be married.” With that, the old man howled with laughter until his worn vocal cords seized up in complaint, causing him to cough and hack yellow-green phlegm

bubbles across the bar. “Best go shift the crap off me chest, lad,” were Old Graham’s parting words before tottering off toward the pub’s toilets.

Harry shook his head and turned to face the opposite side of the bar. Steph, the pub’s only barmaid, was smiling at him while clutching a cardboard box full of MALT ‘N’ SALT crisps against her chest. She placed it down on the bar and pulled an old dishrag from the waistband of her jeans. She wiped down the area where Old Graham had coughed. “He bothering you again, Harry?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, threading his fingers through the knots

and trying to neaten the scruffiness. He sighed. “He’s okay. Just had too much to drink.”

Steph snorted. “You’re one to talk. What time did you get here today?”

“Noon.”

“Exactly, and it’s now...” She glanced at her watch. “Nine in the evening.”

Harry smirked. “Yeah, but at least I have the decency to pass out when I’m drunk, instead of talking people’s heads off like Old Graham.”

“I’ll give you that. Although, I’d like to remind you that you puked on my knee-highs last Sunday. I had to throw them out, and they were my favourite pair!”

Harry stared down at the foamy liquid hissing away in his glass and, for a split-second, felt enough shame that he contemplated not drinking it and going home instead. He quickly let the guilt go and downed the last of the beer, dregs and all. He had enough regret in his life without adding to it. “I must have been a pathetic sight,” he admitted.

Steph frowned. “You’re not pathetic, Harry. Just unlucky. Things

will look up for you one day. You only turned thirty a couple months ago, right? Plenty of time to get back on your feet.” She stopped and looked over at the plate-glass window of the pub. “As long as this dreadful snow doesn’t freeze us all to death first, you’ll be fine. Time heals all wounds.”

Harry sighed. Steph knew about his past and sometimes it made him uncomfortable. “You really think so?” he asked her.

“You better hope so, matey, because I’m not putting up with you puking on me every week. Doesn’t matter how handsome you are!”

They both chuckled and Harry felt his mood lighten a little. It wasn't often that he heard such things from a young woman nowadays. Not when he looked about ten years older than his actual age (he hadn't been able to face a mirror in months so maybe now he looked even worse).

He pushed his empty pint towards Steph and she refilled it diligently. The overflow from the glass slid down over the black heart tattoo on her wrist and made her pale skin wet and glistening. Suddenly, an unprompted desire to lick the beer from her young flesh found its way, unwelcomed, into Harry's head.

He chased the urge away with thoughts of his wife.

Julie had been gone a long time now, but Harry never stopped considering himself married. Never once did he forget his vow to love her forever.

Until Death Do Us Part...

He took his fresh beer, slid off his seat, and moved away from the bar — away from Steph. The worn, tattered padding of the bar stool he'd occupied for the last three hours had sent his backside numb and he now craved the relief of a cushion. He headed towards

a bench below the pub's large front window and, at the same time, saw Old Graham returning from the toilets. There was a small urine stain on the crotch of the old man's grimy, cotton trousers and Harry was relieved to see the pensioner returning to the bar instead of coming over to join him.

Thank God for small mercies.

Harry eased down onto the faded bench cushion and sighed as the blood rushed back to his ass cheeks. He placed his pint down on the chipped wooden table in front of him and picked up the nearest beer mat. There was a picture of a crown on it, along with the

slogan: CROWN ALES, FIT FOR A KING. Without pause, Harry began to peel the printed face away from the cardboard. It was a habit Steph was always scolding him for, but for some reason it seemed to halt his thoughts temporarily, keeping back the demons that haunted him. The brief respite allowed Harry to breathe freely again, if only for a while.

Relaxing further into the creaking backrest, Harry observed the room. The lounge area of The Trumpet was long and slender, with a grimy pair of piss-soaked toilets stinking up an exit corridor at one end while a stone fireplace crisped the air at the other. In

the middle of the pub was a dilapidated oak-wood bar that was older than he was, along with several rickety tables and faded patterned chairs. In a backroom was a small, seldom-used dance floor that Harry had only seen once at New Year's. It was a quiet, rundown pub in a quiet, rundown housing estate – both welcoming and threatening at the same time. Much like the people that drank there.

Tonight the pub was low on drinkers. It usually was on Tuesdays and Harry preferred it that way. He wasn't a big fan of company. Of course it helped that the snowfall had stranded most people to within a hundred yards of

their homes and blocked up the main roads with deserted, snowbound vehicles. With the weather as bad as it was, getting to the pub, for most people at least, was not worth the risk. For Harry it was, because the alternative was being alone. And that was something he hadn't been able to face for a long time. He wondered if it was something he ever would be able to face again. So he had braved the snow and made it to the pub in one piece, surrounding himself with people he barely knew.

But at least I'm not alone.

Somehow Steph had made it in

tonight as well, holding down the fort as she did most evenings. Harry often wondered why she needed all the overtime. She seemed to enjoy her work, but it could've just been the barmaid's code: to be bubbly and polite at all times to all people. Maybe, deep down, she counted each second until she could kick everybody's drunken-asses out and go home. Whatever the truth, Steph was a good barmaid and she kept good control of the place.

Even Damien Banks behaved under her watch. Weekdays were usually free of his slimy presence, but tonight was an unfortunate exception. The local thug was sat with his Rockports up on the

armrest of the sofa beside the fire, a flashy phone fastened to his ear.

No doubt controlling his illicit little empire, Harry thought. *Probably refers to himself as 'the Don'.*

From what Harry had heard – from sources he no longer remembered – the degenerate scumbag pushed his gear on the local estate like some wannabe drug lord. No one in the pub liked Damien, not even his so called friends (or *entourage* as Old Graham would often call them in secret). There were rumours that the shaven-headed bully had once stomped a rival dealer into a coma, then taunted the family afterwards,

revelling in the grief he'd caused.

Harry shook his head. *He's the one who deserves to be in a coma, instead of lounging around like he owns the place.*

There was one other person in the bar tonight. A greasy-haired, oily-skinned hulk named Nigel. Harry had not spoken to the over-sized man much, but spotted him in the pub at least a couple of nights each month. A lorry driver, from what Harry gathered, and spent a lot of time on the road. *Poor guy will probably have to sleep in his cab tonight.*

After Nigel, there was just Old Graham and Harry. Just the five of them, the full set. Tuesday was a lonely night.

Harry swivelled round on the bench, pulled his right knee sideways onto the cushion, and peered out the pub's main window. The Trumpet sat upon a hill overlooking a small row of dingy shops and a decrepit mini-supermarket that had steel shutters instead of windows. Steph once told him that the pub was barely surviving on the wafer-thin profits brought in by the lunchtime traffic of the nearby factories and, if it were to rely on its evening drinkers alone, the place would have closed its doors long ago – even before

the public smoking ban came in and ruined pubs across the land.

Usually Harry could see the shops and supermarket from the window, but tonight his vision faltered after only a few feet, swallowed up by the swirling snow and impeded by a thick condensation that hugged at the window's glass. For all Harry knew, the darkness outside could have stretched on for eternity, engulfing the world in its clammy embrace and leaving the pub a floating limbo of light in an endless abyss. The image was unsettling.

Like something out of the Twilight

Zone.

Snow continued to fall as it had nonstop for the past day and night. Fat, sparkling wisps that passed through the velvet background of the night, making the gloom itself seem alive with movement. Harry shivered; the pub's archaic heating inadequate in defeating the chill. Even the warmth of the fireplace was losing its battle against the encroaching freeze.

God only knows how I'll manage the journey home tonight without any taxis running. Maybe Steph will let me bed down till morning? I hope so.

Harry reached for his pint and pulled it close, resting it on his thigh as he remained sideways on the bench. He traced a finger over his grubby wedding ring and thought about the day he had first put it on. He smiled and felt the warmth of nostalgia wash over him, but then his eyes fell upon the thick, jagged scar that ran across the back of the same hand and the warmth went away. The old wound was shaped like a star and brought back memories far darker than his wedding day. It was something he dared not think about. He drank his beer.

God bless booze and the oblivion it brings.

Harry chuckled about how once he had not cared for the taste of lager – white wine had been his tonic of choice – but The Trumpet wasn't really the type of place where a thirty-year old man could order a nice bottle of Chardonnay without being called a *poofster*.

Funny how a person changes,
Harry considered. *Just wish I'd*
changed for the better.

He took another sip of beer and almost spat it out again. In only two minutes since he'd last tasted it, the beer had gone completely and utterly flat, as if something had literally drained the life

from it. But before Harry could consider what would cause such a thing, a stranger entered the pub.

A second later, the lights went out.

Chapter Two

“Bugger it!” Kath cursed aloud and slapped her palms down on the supermarket’s checkout desk. She’d been two minutes away from finishing the 9pm cash-up and the building’s power had blinked out like someone had flipped a switch.

Bah! Working at this dump ten hours a day is miserable enough without having to do it in the dark. I must have the words, SHIT HAPPENS, stamped across my forehead.

“Peter!” She hollered into the darkness. “Check the fuse box, will you!”

A muffled voice from the nearby stockroom led Kath to believe her order had been received. She sighed and waited as her sight adjusted to the dark, wondering where she could find a torch or some candles (*Doesn't Aisle 6 have some?*). The *Fire Exit* sign above the supermarket's entrance gave off a small degree of illumination, but not enough to see her acrylic fingernails in front of her face. Kath had other senses, however, and her ears picked up the sound of footsteps echoing down the Bread &

Pastries aisle.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

The person was standing close enough that the unexpected volume of their voice made Kath flinch. “It’s *me*,” said the voice. “Jess.”

“Jessica? You stupid girl! You gave me a fright.”

“Sorry, Kathleen. Didn’t mean to, I promise. You know why the lights are out?”

“No, but I’ve told Peter to check the fuse box.”

“Good idea. You reckon it’s just us, or the whole area?”

Kath shrugged in the dark. “How should *I* know? Walk out the front and see for yourself.”

“Okay,” said Jess cheerily, before wandering off in one of the gleeful dazes that Kath hated so much. Sometimes Kath was sure the girl was just out to annoy her.

Like the way she always calls me Kathleen. If it wasn’t so ridiculously hard to fire people these days, that girl would have gotten her marching orders

long ago.

Jess reached the store's main entrance with a skipping hop and her complexion became ghostly as she entered the pulsing green hue of the glowing Fire Exit sign.

Kath cleared her throat. "Well? What are you waiting for, girl?"

Jess pushed open the door and exposed the stark white night outside. Immediately a chill entered the building, rushing quickly to all corners like a horde of fleeing rats. Kath waited impatiently as Jess popped her head out of the door and looked left and right,

then left and right again, before finally stepping back and pulling closed door. When the girl turned back around to face Kath, her company-supplied fleece was peppered with snow.

“The weather out there is craaaaaazeee!” said Jess. “With a capitol zee”

Kath sighed at the girl’s childish tone. “What about the lights? Are anybody else’s on? What about The Trumpet across the road?”

“No,” Jess replied. “I can’t even see the pub it’s so dark. I can’t make out Blue Rays Video Rentals or any of the

other shops either.”

“Wonderful!” Kath shook her head and felt a migraine coming on. If the whole area was out then she would be forced to sit and wait for the electricity company to get off their overpaid behinds and do something about it.

...and God only knows how long that will take. Two minutes? Two hours?

Either way, until she could cash up Kath couldn't set the alarms and go home. Not that she had plans, besides catching up on the episodes of *Eastenders* she'd recorded, but staying

at a dingy council-estate mini-mart on the coldest night of the year wasn't her idea of fun.

How did my life turn out so wrong? To think I spent four years at university... I make one little mistake and I'm condemned to a life of pointless mediocrity. Kath breathed in deeply then let the cold air out through her nostrils. *What a wretched waste of intellect!*

“It’ll be back on in a jiffy,” said Jess, still standing by the fire exit. “It never takes long, Kathleen. Tell you what, I’ll take a little walk over to the pub and see if anyone knows anything,

okay?”

Without pausing for an answer, Jess slid out through the exit and was immediately swallowed by the shifting snow and darkness. A second later it was as if the girl had never even been there.

Kath sighed, leaned back into the torn-padding of the cashier-desk stool, and rubbed at her aching forehead. Shivers ran up and down her spine and made her think about the store's heating. With the power off, so too would be the store's electric fan heaters. It was Britain's worst winter in history and she was stuck in a building with no warmth.

Just gets better! Probably why the power went off in the first place. All those lazy slobs, cosy at home in front of their fan-heater, over-taxing the grid while people like me, who have shown some commitment to work, suffer.

Well screw this, Kath decided. She'd give her manager, Mr Campbell, a call and see if there was any chance he'd allow her to cash up in the morning. She slid her fingertips along the icy surface of the shop's counter and searched for the phone, but at first found only a stapler and some biros. Eventually the side of her hand found what it was looking for; knocking the receiver from

its cradle and off of the desk. It swung on its coiled cord, jerking up and down like a bungee. After a couple of swipes at knee-level, Kath caught the handset and pulled it up to her ear. She tapped at the buttons on the phone's cradle, waited a beat, and then tapped them some more. No dial tone. Perturbed, she placed the handset back down onto its cradle, before picking it up and trying to ring out once more.

Nothing.

“Please, for the love of God!” Kath patted down the pockets of her work shirt and located her mobile phone. She plucked it out and slid up the

illuminated screen to expose the keypad. Then, from memory, she entered Mr Campbell's number and pressed the green CALL button. She put the phone to her ear and waited.

Ten seconds passed and Kath pulled the phone away from her head to look at the display. She could barely contain her frustration when she saw NO NETWORK COVERAGE scrolled across the top of the screen.

For crying out loud. What the hell is going on tonight?

Before she could put her next thoughts in order, Kath was interrupted

by a voice in the darkness. It was male.
“Ms Hollister?”

The voice had a Polish twang and there was only one person at the supermarket that ever called her by surname. “Peter,” she said, more calmly than she felt. “Have you checked the fuses?”

“Yes, Ms Hollister. I need show something to you. Come.”

Speak properly, for God's sake. If you're going to come here then at least learn the language. And show me what exactly? Bah, I'm never going to get home at this rate!

Reluctant, Kath followed the boy down to the back of the store, ducking through the strips of clear plastic that separated the cramped warehouse from the shop floor.

“So, what is it that’s so important, Peter?”

“One moment, Ms Hollister. I will show to you.”

Peter turned a corner in the cramped warehouse and Kath stayed close behind him, lighting the way with her mobile phone. It didn’t work particularly well, but at least it

illuminated the piles of over-stacked boxes she would've otherwise bumped into.

Kath was getting impatient. "Come on now, I've got to find a way to call Mr Campbell so we can all go home tonight. Unless you want to spend the night sleeping in the staff room?"

Peter stopped at the far wall and pointed upwards, just above the height of his shoulder. Kath glanced at the area a few inches away from the boy's outstretched finger. She didn't understand and felt her patience thin even more. "What exactly am I supposed to be looking at?"

Peter rolled his eyes in the faint glow of his phone display and then moved the light source toward the area he was trying to highlight.

Kath sighed. “The fuse box? Yes, very impressive.”

Peter rolled his eyes again and she was about to scold him for it when she spotted what he wanted her to see. It was the fuse box alright – at least it had been in a former life – but now it was a black, melted decay of wires and bubbling plastic. The green metal box that housed the circuits was untouched, but the area within looked as though it

had been subjected to a hellish blaze. The acrid stench of singed rubber lingered in the cold, crisp air, but it wasn't as strong as one would expect after an electrical fire.

“I don't understand,” said Kath. “What could cause this?”

Peter shrugged at her. “I no sure. Fire maybe?”

“Obviously not, Peter. There hasn't been a fire because the alarms would have gone off. Not to mention it would have spread. This place is full of cardboard and paper.”

“Blowtorch?”

Kath considered Peter's wild suggestion, her thoughts wandering off into the dark, insidious alleyways of her mind. Could someone have really taken a welder's torch to the fuses? Was someone lurking in the shadows intending to have their way with her in the dark? Had some hairy beast of a man been watching her for months, planning something like this? It was certainly an opportune time with all the snowfall. The police would never make it in time, even if she managed to call them. It seemed ridiculous but, for a moment, so plausible in her anxious state of mind that she actually started to

believe that someone was intending to murder her. It was like something straight out of a Richard Laymon novel she'd once read by mistake, thinking it was something else. *Horrible, disgusting book. Monsters in the cellar.*

It wasn't until Kath's next thought that she considered herself ridiculous for letting her overactive imagination run away from her. "Ridiculous," she said finally, "if it *was* someone with a blowtorch then how on earth did they manage to do it to the pub's fuse box at the exact same time? They have no power across the street either. Same with Blue Rays on the corner."

Pete shrugged and walked off.

Nothing ever seems to concern that boy; just another lazy foreigner. Someone ought to use a blowtorch on his backside! Maybe then he'd show some enthusiasm.

Suddenly alone, Kath tried to make sense of the situation. Was some deranged madman really stalking the neighbourhood, cutting off everyone's electricity? Or was her biggest threat merely freezing to death on the coldest night of the year? Neither outcome was appealing. All Kath knew for sure was that the fuse box didn't destroy itself and

that the real cause had yet to make itself known.

She shivered; the chill in the air thickening suddenly, like a crushing, physical thing that squeezed at the gristle on her bones. There was no way she could stay there any longer. Not without power. Not in the dark. She made a decision. “Right, Peter, where are you?”

A scuffling sound from the far corner of the warehouse. “I’m here, by the beer crates.”

“Well, make sure you’re careful. You break anything and you’ll have a

record of discussion before the week is out.”

Peter didn't respond, but Kath was certain she heard the boy sigh. She enjoyed getting under people's skin and let loose a smile as crude as the oil-slick darkness that surrounded her. Suddenly she felt more in charge, more like her usual self. “Peter,” she shouted. “Place some pallets against the back shutter. We're going to call it a night, but we need to secure the building as best we can before we leave.”

“Okay, I will do this, but where is Jess? She can help.”

“She’s wandered off somewhere.”

Kath snorted. “Least of my worries right now, so go do as I’ve said – and make sure you’re careful.”

Peter scurried away, mumbling something in Polish. At least Kath imagined it was Polish. Could be Russian or Hungarian, or whatever it is they all seemed to speak – ugly, primitive language that hurt her ears to listen to. How had Britain gotten so weak? There was a time when it had invaded third-rate nations, but now the once-great empire seemed more interested in letting them all in and keeping them fed and warm. It made her stomach turn to think her Government

cared more about benefit-seeking immigrants than educated citizens like her.

Kath left the warehouse and re-entered the supermarket, happily listening to the loud scraping noises of Peter struggling to shift the pallets in the warehouse. The thought of him blindly bumping around on his own made her chuckle as she walked towards the supermarket's exit. She leaned against the glass fire door and looked outside. There was little she could do to secure the building – not without being able to bring the electric shutter down from the awning – but she could at least lock up with her keys. She didn't expect anyone

would be desperate enough to brave the cold to steal some groceries anyway; no one walking around in snow this deep, unscrupulous or otherwise. At least she hoped so...

Yet, deep down in Kath's gut, a dull throbbing, that was not her stomach ulcer, told her that tonight could well turn out to be a very long night.

Chapter Three

“B’jaysus, it’s nice to be in the warm again. Cold as a nun’s pussy out there so it is.”

Harry looked in the direction of the stranger’s voice, over by the pub’s entrance, and found himself at a loss. The cheery Irish accent was not what he expected. In fact, when Harry had first realised the presence of the stranger, he had felt something...ominous. But that seemed silly now.

“Hey, who is that?” asked Steph from behind the bar. “Anyone we know?”

A hearty chuckle floated over from the doorway as the stranger spoke once more. “No Lass, I do not believe we’ve had the pleasure. The name’s Lucas Fergus and I am on a vital quest to get some beer down me neck.”

Steph laughed and Harry found himself amused too. It wasn’t often the pub was graced with such colour beyond old men and their tall tales of the past.

“Well,” said Steph, “I can only offer you bottles and shots at the

moment. As you can see the power is off, and that means the pumps are dry. Cash only, too, if that's alright?"

"Cash is the only way an honourable man pays for anything in my mind so there be no worries there, and I don't care whether the beer comes from bottle or tap either. It all ends up in the same place."

"No arguments here," said a voice Harry recognised as Old Graham's.

Over by the fireplace the flickering silhouette of Damien shifted and stirred at the presence of the stranger. Harry had learned from past occasions that

Damien didn't like people he didn't know. People he didn't know were usually unaware of his reputation; he did not like that at all. Once, Harry had witnessed Damien carve his initials into some poor lad's forehead with a nasty-looking blade, just so people would know he was to be respected. The young man had screamed the entire time. The police never came; no one called them.

And Harry knew that the police wouldn't come tonight either. No matter what happened.

Thankfully, Damien had been uncharacteristically quiet all night; but

Harry couldn't help but worry that meant something bad. When a venomous snake stopped acting like a snake, what did it mean?

Does it mean they're more dangerous?

“Can we bear some light in here, you reckon?” Lucas asked them all, flicking open a glinting zippo lighter and illuminating his face in flame. He looked about Harry's age – early-thirties – boyishly handsome with a cheeky grin to match. The man's head was tangled with wild tussles of mousy brown hair that crept below his ears. Harry thought he looked like a handsome traveller

from the front cover of one of the trashy *Mills and Boon* novels his wife used to collect.

“In weather like this I’m surprised you’re not all around that lovely fireplace.” Lucas moved toward the bar, his flame-lit face a disembodied ghost as it crossed the room. “Or does that wee bald fella on the sofa not play well with others?”

“The less said about that the better,” warned Steph in a hushed voice.

Harry cringed, worried about the response the newcomer’s comment could possibly elicit from Damien, and

was thankful, if a little surprised, when the young thug merely turned away and returned to whatever he was doing. It really wasn't like Damien to be so reserved.

*He's preoccupied with something.
But what?*

Confident that no trouble was going to occur – at least for the time-being – Harry decided he would join the newcomer at the bar. Sitting alone in the dark wasn't awfully appealing and he needed a refill anyway. His current beer smelt like bad eggs.

“So Lucas,” Harry said, arriving at

the bar and propping his elbows against its gnarled surface. “Where have you come in from?”

Lucas turned to Harry, the zippo still lighting his face. His striking blue eyes flickered in the shimmering glow of the flame. “I’ve come in from the bloody cold fella, but before that I came from down south.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “South?”

“That’s what I said now, isn’t it? Been here-there-and-everywhere in my time – up and down, upside down – but originally I hail from the North. Been spending a lot of time in the South more

recently though, after a falling out with me father. Suits me just fine; warmer climate, you know?”

Harry nodded; the gesture pointless in the dark. “I take it you’re talking about Northern and Southern Ireland, or do you mean since you’ve been in England?”

“Now, where is that drink I heard a rumour about,” said Lucas, single-mindedly. “This is a pub, is it not?”

Steph shouted from the backroom behind the bar. “Hold your horses! For a complete stranger you’re pretty demanding.”

“I’m a growing lad, and if ye make me wait I may just fade away. Or, worse than that, I may sober up.”

Steph came back through to the bar holding a wooden tray full of mismatched candles. The flames danced around her breasts and Harry tried not to stare at them. Carefully, she placed the candles evenly along the bar and the heady smell of burning wax wafted into the air. The first candle she had placed in front of Old Graham, whilst the last went in front of Nigel. In between, Harry and Lucas got candles too.

“That’s better,” said Steph. “Now,

who wants a beer besides our new friend here?”

“I’m ready for one,” said Harry.
“This one has gone bad.”

“Mine too,” said Old Graham, pushing his own pint forward. “I’m going to have to have a dozen more just to make up for it.”

Steph scrunched up her face. “Strange...Maybe there’s a problem with the taps. Not surprised, the amount you lot drink. They probably couldn’t take the strain.”

Lucas chuckled. “Looks like I’ve

come to the right place. You're men after me own heart, and now that I can see a little bit better, I can also admire what a fine young wench we have ourselves behind the bar."

"Hey, less of the wench!" Steph objected. They all laughed and she got to work handing them their bottled beers, each of them swigging deeply as though it was their first of the night. Perhaps for Lucas it was.

The Irishman pointed a finger. "So who's the beefy fella down the end of the bar that doesn't talk?"

"My name is Nigel and I can hear

you.”

“Well, Big Man, come and suck ale with the rest of us.”

“Maybe later.”

“What’s wrong with you, man? There a gal down there with ya?”

“Huh, I wish,” said Nigel.

“Get your moody arse down here! A fella shouldn’t be lonesome on a night like this. The cold out there could kill a man stone dead.”

“Okay, okay!” Nigel conceded,

disturbing the shadows as he raised his hands in front of his face. He slid down the bar to join them all, dumping his heavy mass down onto a creaking stool beside Lucas. Harry nodded hello at the man and he nodded back.

Lucas certainly had a knack for bringing people together. *Magnetic personality* was the phrase that came to Harry's mind.

Lucas spoke again. "You know something, fellas? I don't think that snow is gonna let up tonight. No word of a lie but it's like the feckin end of the world out there."

“Oh, very nice,” said Steph. “You walk into my pub and start worrying everyone. We’ve all got to try and get home tonight.”

“What? Are ye drunk, lass? Ain’t no man getting anywhere in that winter blanket.”

Steph’s face dropped slightly, the dull candle-light making her expression seem grim. “How did you get here then?”

Lucas smiled knowingly. “I was nearby and realised things were bad, so I thought to meself, ‘where’s the best place to be stuck on a night like this?’

Well of course there was only one answer, wasn't there?"

"The boozier!" Old Graham shouted gleefully, clearly delighted by the Irishman's philosophy. "Anyway," the pensioner added, "don't you worry, young Stephanie. There's always room upstairs at my place to keep warm."

Cheeky sod, thought Harry. *Wonder if the old guy even has enough lead in his pencil to get it up these days? If he does, then fair play to the old bugger.*

Steph laughed defiantly, the air from her nostrils slanting the flames of

the nearby candles. “The only way you’ll get me up there, old man, is if you’re sleeping on the roof.”

Everyone cackled and swigged their beers. Everyone except Damien, Harry observed. The thug was scowling at them from the shadows of the fireplace, watching their every move. No one else seemed to notice though, and the giggling chatter amongst the group at the bar continued.

Yet, despite the light-heartedness, Harry couldn’t help but notice that the snow outside continued to fall...

And it seemed to be getting worse.

As did Damien's scowling.

Chapter Four

“Dude, just sit the hell down! If you break something my Dad will freak.” Ben didn’t need this from Jerry tonight. Not with the power going out and such shitty weather. It was like a dozen winters rolled into one and he was stuck in his father’s video store not knowing what to do for the best.

“Chill out, B-Dog!” said Jerry, shining his key ring torch into his face and contorting his skeletal features into a ghoulish grimace. The DVD cases on

the cluttered shelves behind him shone with each movement of the light. “You need to stop worrying about your slave-driving old man. It’s not like he ever does anything for *you* – other than work you to death, that is, and make you come in on a day where everything else is closed. An *important meeting*, my arse! He just couldn’t be bothered to waste another day at the *Video Store of the Damned*. ”

Ben frowned, though it was too dark in the store’s dusty back-office for Jerry to see it. “Stop calling it that! The place is doing just fine. He really did have a meeting, and it’s not every day he trusts me to look after Blue Rays on my

own either, so the last thing I need is you making my life hard, okay? Just behave and don't mess anything up."

"Okay, okay," Jerry conceded. "What would you like me to do with myself, oh wise Gandalf?"

Ben threw his head back and cursed. "I told you to stop calling me that!"

"Get rid of that gay beard and I will. Either that or I'll get some hairy-assed Hobbits in here so you can feel more at home."

"Just..." Ben took a deep breath

and let it out slowly. “Sit down will you, while I try to get the power back on.”

Thankfully, Jerry complied, hoisting his stick-like figure up onto the service desk and remaining quiet. Ben could still hear him fidgeting away for anything to get his spindly fingers on, but at least for now he was rooted in one place; his area of recklessness limited.

Sometimes Ben didn't know why he put up with Jerry. They'd known each other since they were peeing in pre-school sandpits, but for some reason his friend had never seemed to mature mentally like he had. Ben had gone to

College, whilst Jerry sponged off his mom and stepdad. Ben started dating girls, whilst Jerry brought an Xbox – and then later an Xbox 360. Finally, Ben had started to shoulder some of his dad's business responsibilities, ready to one day take them on as his own, and Jerry...? Well now Jerry spent most his days hanging around Blue Rays Rentals bothering him and making fun of his beard or 'jelly-belly'. Still, they were best friends and Ben knew that if it ever came down to it, Jerry would do anything for him. There was something comforting about that. *Not like anybody else cares.* Besides, deep down, Ben liked having Jerry around. Despite the odd annoyances, they had a lot of fun

together. Even the *Ben and Jerry* jokes didn't really bother him too much anymore. Tonight however, Jerry was stretching his patience paper-thin.

“When you gonna get the lights on again?” Jerry asked. “It’s like *Saturday Night Fever* in here.” He swept his penlight around the room, strobing the low-hung, suspended ceiling like a disco hall. Movie posters of a disgruntled-looking Deniro and an uncomfortable-looking Ben Stiller lit up and disappeared as the light passed over them.

“If it is, you’re no John Travolta!” Ben walked across to the far side of the

office, behind the IKEA computer desk and towards the fuse box. He didn't know anything about electrics and he was hoping to flick a switch and be done with it. Likely, it would be more complicated than that.

Before the power had gone off, Ben had been watching the news with Jerry (well, to be more honest, Jerry was waiting for a re-run of *The Matrix* to come on). The reports had said that the country's infrastructure was expected to be affected by the snow for several more days and that blackouts were likely as people's heating usages rose to monumental amounts. It didn't bother Ben too much, so long as nothing

happened to his father's store whilst he was in charge of it; that was the main thing. The way he saw it, people just loved an excuse to panic, and the snow was their most recent fixation. You wouldn't catch him freaking out though. Ben's father had taught him better than that; taught him about *being a man*, and about how business came first.

Before anything else.

Before silly little friendships with that imbecile, Jerry.

Ben shook his father's words out of his head and pulled out his keys from his pocket, sifting through them one by one.

There must be twenty keys here! I don't even know what Dad uses most of them for. I'm sure one of them is for the fuse box though. It's a little silver one if I remember correctly...

Earlier, he and Jerry had become concerned by the amount of snow that had been falling throughout the day – especially as it seemed to be worldwide (*was that even possible?*) – and, when it had started to pile up above knee height, the two of them had gone across to the supermarket down the lane – which was also, surprisingly, open – to stock up on snacks and beers in case they got stuck there. They were willing to wait it out if

they had to, but Ben hoped Jerry could keep his exuberance under control during that time. His best friend had a knack for breaking things. Ben called it the *Jerry-effect*.

Ben swung open the fuse cabinet and flicked open his monogrammed lighter. He'd stopped smoking months ago but it had been a present from his father – and they were too few and far between to just go discarding them. His eyes glazed for a second as they adjusted to the light and, when his vision finally compensated, he blinked, unsure of what he was seeing. From the look of things, the entire fuse box had burnt out and melted in a flash of intense heat. It was

a mess and smelt like singed rubber. It made no sense at all. Wasn't the whole point of having fuses to prevent things like this? Power surges and whatnot? There wasn't anything he could think of that could cause such severe heat damage, especially without burning anything outside of the fuse box. It was entirely localised to the area within the metal frame and not a speck of paint was damaged beyond that. It was strange, for sure. Ben plucked at his scruffy brown beard rhythmically as he tried to find a thought that fit, a thought that didn't worry him. A thought that wasn't insane. But all he could think was...

Dad will blow a fuse of his own

when he finds out about this.

At that moment, Jerry shouted out from the shop floor. “What’s happening, Gandalf? You squeezing one out in there or what?”

Ben shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Dude, I swear, not now, okay!”

“Okay, okay,” Jerry said. “Don’t get your beard in a twist. It’s not like it’s the end of the world – although we *are* missing *The Matrix*.”

Chapter Five

Kath wasn't prepared to stay here all night in the dark. She tried her mobile phone again and hissed when it still refused to dial out.

Knew I should have stayed home this morning.

Everyone else in the country had been skiving off and calling in sickies due to the unprecedented snowfall, so why hadn't she? *Because I have integrity; something most other people*

sadly lack in this day and age. Luckily, Peter and Jess lived within walking distance of the store and had had no excuses not to come in. They knew she wouldn't stand for any absence. *If I can make it in then so can they.* Most people who drove could have gotten to work if they really wanted to, but they were lazy degenerates that worked only when they had no choice or social benefits available. Not many people would have come in for a ten hour shift like she had that day.

Where has it gotten me though?
Nowhere!

Kath looked toward the exit doors.

They were closed but she could still see the drifting snow outside, piling up against the glass. Peter had cleared it away only two hours before and it was already rising back again. She'd have to have the lad shovel it away again if they didn't get going soon. It was starting to feel more like the North Pole than central England.

Shivering, Kath untucked her arms away from her sides and felt around the till-area for the phone. The thought that someone may have been responsible for the power going off still worried her and all she wanted to do was talk to someone in authority. *Mr Campbell. The power company. The police.*

Anyone.

Peter stood nearby (she'd insisted on it) and the intermittent glow of his mobile phone made Kath feel a little safer, but it was only enough to take a slight edge off her nerves. She plucked the phone off its cradle and typed in a number.

There was still no dial tone.

Kath slammed the handset back down.

“Is okay?” Peter asked in his horrible broken English.

“Everything is fine. I just dropped the phone. Do you know where Jessica is yet? I need to close up, but not before I’ve done a staff search. Its night’s like tonight when things go missing.”

There was silence for a moment and Kath’s heart-rate rose as the emptiness poked at her anxiety. A few seconds later Peter made himself known again. “I do not know where she is. Do you?”

Kath sighed. “Would I have asked you, if I did? Last I knew she was out front checking if anyone knew why the power was off. I don’t think she’s come back.”

Peter started heading off towards the exit. “Should I go look for her?”

The thought of being alone made Kath shout out. “No! Stay here. The last thing I, uh, need is you both getting lost.”

Pete began walking back toward the counter. “You think she is lost?”

Kath sniggered. “That girl would lose her head if it wasn’t sewn on. I’m sure whatever she’s doing out there, she’s managed to find her way into trouble. Just lea-”

Her body was suddenly wracked with shivers, cutting her words off mid-sentence. It was getting colder. It hadn't seemed anywhere near as chilly just an hour ago when the power had first gone off. Perhaps the temperature had dropped so rapidly because the heating was out? It made sense, but for some reason didn't seem right. It had gotten too cold too fast; unnaturally so.

She looked out through the glass doors again. If the doors didn't open inwards as well as out, Kath was certain they would have been jammed inside. She watched as the top layer of snow began to jitter, swirl, and flow; lightly at first, but then more intently. The wind

was picking up and starting to howl.

Kath wrapped her arms around herself. “For God sake, Peter, will you hurry up? We need to leave.”

We need to leave right now.

####

Jess could barely see an inch in front of the freckles on her nose. The snow hit her face relentlessly, filling her nostrils and blurring her eyes. It felt like

she was going to suffocate, yet she had no choice but to persevere and find her way back to the supermarket. It was embarrassing that she'd managed to get herself so disorientated – it could have been only been ten feet before she'd found herself turned around and lost - but every direction led to a white, blossom background that seemed to creep on endlessly. She shivered, partly from anxiety but mostly from the fact she was freezing.

Really smart, Jessica. A+ for common sense.

She cried out for help and was unsurprised when she was met with near

silence – the only other sound being the shrill whistle of the increasing wind. Despite the lack of reply, Jess called out again, lacking other ideas. When she was once again met with silence, Jess paused to gather her thoughts. The biting cold was worse when standing still.

What did they teach us at school about being stranded in the snow? That's right – Nothing! People in England aren't supposed to get stranded in the snow. That's for places like Russia, or the North-freakin-Pole. In this country all we're meant to face is a bad case of drizzle and maybe a hosepipe ban in the summer.

The brightest thought Jess could come up with prompted her to reach into her trouser pocket. Fumbling amongst her loose change and clock-in swipe card, she pulled out her mobile phone. It was slender and metallic, painted pink with silver sequins, and her intention was to use it to call Peter at the supermarket; get him to shout out of the doorway so that she could track his voice. She'd be back in moments, no doubt feeling like a fool, but as long as it was only Peter she wouldn't mind too much. He would keep things to himself and not tell the super-bitch, *Kathleen*. Peter was trustworthy.

The phone lit up at once when she

pressed its keypad, but it became immediately apparent to Jess that something was wrong with it.

This isn't supposed to happen, she thought, shaking her head. Not in England.

But she didn't get upset about it; it was too weird to register in her brain and form that emotion. Her phone still had power, but its display was garbled – distorted by vertical lines and random squiggles. She tried making some calls but was unsuccessful. The phone lacked even a dial tone.

She put the phone away and

resumed her aimless wandering. The snow had been trampled down where she was heading and she assumed that it was the main path, so she followed it.

As a child, Jess had loved the winter and wished for snow every Christmas – her favourite time of year – but this worldwide inclement weather made her nervous. There was a sense of foreboding to the howling wind that made Jess wonder if it would ever stop snowing at all. She'd heard on the radio that people had already begun to perish from the crushing cold, and it had only gotten worse since then. Now that her mobile phone wasn't working – something she'd never known to happen,

except for one New Year when too many text messages were sent simultaneously – it left Jess feeling even more uncertain. Of course her phone may just have been faulty.

“Yeah, that’s it,” she said to herself, hoping it would calm her nerves to hear a voice, even if it was just her own. “It’s just faulty.”

Somehow, she didn’t believe it.

When she spotted something in the snow up ahead, she knew for certain that she was wrong.

####

It was almost thirty minutes before Peter was done. Kath heard the boy's footsteps coming from the BOOZE & SPIRITS aisle. "Is everything secure?" she asked him.

"Yes, Ms Hollister."

"Let's get going then."

"But we still not know where Jess is."

Kath grunted. “She’s responsible for her own well-being. I can’t afford to wait around for that silly girl any longer. If you’re so concerned, go wondering around in the snow for her yourself.”

“Thank you, Ms Hollister. I will go now.”

Kath listened to the boy’s footsteps retreating towards the supermarket’s exit. He was about to leave her alone; in the darkness.

“Peter, wait!” she shouted.
“You’re right. We shouldn’t just leave Jess to her own devices. We should go

find her then all get home together.”

Peter’s footsteps halted. “Okay, Ms Hollister. Hurry!”

The fact that she was being given orders by a staff member made Kath furious, but the increasing howls of the snowstorm made her feel uncharacteristically subdued. “Coming,” she said.

Chapter Six

Harry shivered as he started his next beer. It was getting colder and the scar on the back of his hand started to ache in response, reminding him of things he'd rather forget. Things he drank to forget. He swigged deeply from his beer bottle.

The Irishman, Lucas, turned his attention to Old Graham at the end of the bar. "So, Father Time, you must have been around a fair few turns of the world? You ever see snow like this

before?”

“Well,” Old Graham began, visibly delighted at being the centre of attention. “There was a time in the fifties where things got a little chilly as I recall; and of course me old man told tales of winter in the Ardennes that sounded far more hellish than this.”

Nigel piped up from the opposite end of the bar. “Yeah, well that’s the Ardennes. It’s normal to have snow there. The amount we’ve had here the past couple days isn’t natural. Not to mention that it’s snowing everywhere. All over the world. In every country. Maybe it’s because of the ozone layer or

something?”

Lucas chuckled. “Give over, man! You think a couple of cow farts has the ability to change the weather?”

Harry joined the debate. “What do you put the snow down to then, Lucas? I mean I haven’t known it to ever snow half as much as this. It certainly seems like something made the weather mad.”

“The world is a gazillion years old,” said Lucas, putting his beer bottle down on the bar as if to make a point. “I bet there’s been weather like this before – just not in your lifetime. It’s a tad unusual, no doubt, but I don’t believe in

all that ozone layer nonsense.”

Nigel seemed disgruntled in the light of his candle, maybe even angry. “That’s your opinion, isn’t it?” he said. “Don’t mean I’m not right. We’ve been abusing this planet for decades and it can’t go on forever.”

Lucas put up his hands. “Calm down there, fella, no need to get your hackles up. It’s just the beer talking, you know? Makes me feel a thousand times older and wiser than I should ever admit to. You’re probably right though, humanity *has* been abusing God’s green earth for a fair few years now, and maybe it can’t go on forever. But, right

now, my only concern is having a good time with a wee tippie to keep me warm.” He looked at Steph and winked. “And maybe a good woman wouldn’t go amiss either.”

“You’re an alcoholic leech,” said Nigel, a candle-lit half-smile on his face.

As I said before, I’ve come to the right place then.” Lucas laughed out loud, hoisted his bottle up into the air and said “*cheers!*” The others joined him in the toast, although the word *alcoholic* being bandied around made Harry feel uncomfortable. It was such a dirty word that encompassed so many

types of people. Not everyone drank for the same reasons. Not everyone had to deal with the same burdens.

Sometimes a beer is just a beer.

Harry took another swig from his bottle and sighed at the burning satisfaction it left in his chest. When he pulled it away from his lips it was two-thirds empty.

For some reason, Lucas had begun staring at him inquisitively from inside the flickering cocoon of his candle-light. “So what’s *your* story, fella?” he asked Harry. “What’s the meaning of your life?”

Harry swigged the last of his beer then pushed the bottle toward Steph, who was already on the case with a replacement. “My life,” he said, “has no meaning. Not anymore.”

Lucas frowned. “Come now, everybody’s life has meaning. We all have a purpose.”

“Really? Then why don’t you tell me what *mine* is, because I sure as hell don’t know.”

“I can’t tell you that.” Lucas smiled. “Every man has to find his own path and his own destination. Who

knows though, maybe you'll find yours tonight."

Harry started on his next beer with a hearty swig, gasping for breath afterwards. He looked Lucas square in the face. "Sorry, but I find that hard to believe."

Lucas stared back, his face unflinching like a handsome slab of sculpted granite. He patted Harry on the back. "Well, Harry Boy, perhaps what you need is a little more faith."

"Faith? You think I should believe that there's some almighty-being up there responsible for everything that

happens?”

Lucas shook his head. “Like hell I do! Everything that happens down here is because of man and man alone. The Good Lord’s not here to babysit us. We can only blame ourselves for the things that happen in our lives. Well, we can blame ourselves or other people.”

Harry felt his blood heat up, fighting back against the chill in his veins. He took offence to a stranger offering him ‘life-advice’. No one could understand what he’d been through. Harry looked down at the scar on his hand, shaped like a star, and thought about the events that led to it; thought

about Julie and Toby twisted and shattered in the remains of the bright-red Mercedes he'd been so proud to buy. *Only 8,000 miles on the clock. Good as new!* That night Harry had discovered that material possessions meant nothing, as the only truly important things in his life slowly bled away from him. There had been so much damage that he couldn't tell where his wife and child's broken bodies ended and the crumpled metal of the car began. It looked like some abominable piece of modern art sculpture. Harry had fallen from the car with nothing more than a bad headache and a scratched nostril; he was free to watch as his family died in front of him, one laboured breath at a time. Where

had the justice been in that?

“Whoever is to blame for my life,” Harry told Lucas, “can go fuck himself.”

Lucas moved a half-step away from Harry. “Easy, fella, not looking for an argument. You just seem like a bit of a lost soul, and I like to take an interest.”

“An interest in lost souls?”

“Absolutely. The only wisdom left to be found is from the pain men feel, and you strike me as a man with a belly full of it.”

Harry put down his beer. If he was honest he didn't really know what the man was trying to get at. "Sorry to let you down," he said, "but I don't feel anything. Not anymore."

Lucas cournin the Irishmas direction. 5What0t5The online a man gives uopike is when they a lover...or a child. startnodding ifd found the answer to his own queon. 5W i a boy or a girl0t5It,spat, 5w a boy. Toby.0tThere w silencthick enoughtha a snow ploughwould bluntagain it. hanever le anyin The Trumpe know about Toby. It w his place to escapfroml the pity and well-wishingtha his onc-friend and familhabec consumwith sinc the

accident. This was his place to come and be
along with his pain, and to remember his son
the way he wanted to. I'm so, said Damien,
before swallowing his beer bottle to the
end. No one else spoke.
did anything else either. He had been
consumed by deep sadness. Not just for Toby,
or his wife Julie. He always felt sadness for
them, but sadness because he knew that he
could never come back here again. The
Trumpet's sanctuary of anonymity was gone
now. Oka, said, raising beer in the
dim light of the fire. Well, change the subject,
but first: thanks to Toby, his soul is
where safe and pleasant. The group raised
bottle and said Toby's name. said
nothing. He started into the
fire. mbp:pagebreak/>Chapter

Fourteen
Peter has seen Jess, or anybody else, in a long time now, not since he was with Kath. Earlier the two of them had heard screaming and he was certain it was Jess. His selfish boss-lady had chosen to leave for the nearby pub, caring not about herself, but he had decided to do the right thing and go find his friend. It had not gone as well as he hoped. Peter was one to lose his cool easily. No one in Poland was after what his grandparents lived through. It gave them a unique perspective on what really matters in life. Yet, Peter had to admit to himself that he was starting to get anxious. Concentration kept his breathing steady and emptied his mind of all thoughts. If a person did not think they could not become afraid. If he just continued walking, he

would find one soon or at least reach
houses. One thing was for certain: It
could not go on like this much longer
in pure white nothingness all around and
in every direction. If it did... then
would certainly freeze to death. It was an
absurd thought, but very real at the moment as the
sub-zero temperatures swelled pads on his
fingertips that he could no longer form a
fist. Peter was used to the cold. It was
regularly freezing in his hometown, just
outside of Warsaw, but since his two-year
stay in England had begun, he did not know
conditions like this. It reminded him more
of the Arctic Circle than Great Britain. It
placed him to follow his dream and earn
money he could not dream of in Poland.
enjoy being here to stay also, and, despite

todd pockets of racism (*your taking our jobs!*) the local population has been welcoming. England has become as much a home to him as his own country. But today he wouldn't do anything to be back home with Momma and Poppa. He'd never felt as alone as he did right now.

“Jess,” he called out into the emptiness. “Jess, are you ok? It is Peter.”

There was no response, as there had not been for the last twenty minutes since he'd first split ways from Kath. He'd almost given up hope of finding Jess now, but that didn't stop him worrying about why she had screamed.

Jess was a nice girl, attractive and funny. Most of the Polish people in the town stuck to their own and socialised together – especially when it came to dating. It was easier that way and provoked less xenophobia than if the Polish men went around sleeping with the English women, but, if Peter was honest, he yearned to spend time with Jess, and thought about kissing her all the time.

I hope you are okay, my beautiful friend.

“Peter!”

He stopped in his tracks, the snow

crunching beneath his polished work shoes. “Jess, is that you?”

“Yes, Peter, I’m over here. I need help. Come quick.”

Peter turned a full circle, unable to pinpoint where Jess’s voice was coming from. “Jess, I hear you, but I not see you. Jess?”

The voice came closer. “Peter, I’m here. Help!”

Peter turned another circle and stopped half way around. He spotted something in the distance and stepped toward it. “Jess, I see you.”

In the near distance, Peter could just about make out a grey shape in the howling blizzard. A sigh of relief whistled from his cold, blue lips and he began to head toward it.

####

Jess and Jerry had fled in terror after witnessing Ben's death – *disintegration?* – too much in shock to comprehend what they had witnessed.

“I don’t have...a goddamn clue what...just happened,” said Jerry, out of breath from all the running.

Jess was beginning to slow down too. They hadn’t gone far, but in the deep, sucking snow, running any length at all was an endurance test. “I need... to stop,” she said. “I’ve got a stitch.”

Jerry halted and looked at her. Then he grabbed her arm and pulled hard. “Are you loco? That thing will get us. You never stop when there’s a demon on your arse. Have you never seen *Friday the 13th*?”

Jess pulled back, her chest rising

and falling in great heaves. “There’s... no such thing as...demons.”

“There *is* too. *Exorcist* was based on true events and so was *The Entity*.”

Jess shook her head. “They just say that so idiots like you believe it. The thing in the hood wasn’t chasing us when we ran. I think we can stop.”

“You saw what it did to Ben!” Jerry seemed to struggle with something internally, before going on. Maybe he was realising that his childhood friend was gone for real; that it wasn’t all just some movie. “It killed him,” he said, staring her in the eyes, “and if we don’t

get moving it'll get us too."

Jess nodded. "Okay, but where the hell are we going? I can't see anything and I've already gotten lost in this snow once tonight."

Jerry pulled on her arm again and the two of them started moving. "We need to find the pub or see if your boss is still at the supermarket."

Jess laughed. "I'd rather let that thing back there have me than ask that cow for help."

"The pub it is then," said Jerry.

####

Twenty minutes later, the two of them came to a stop at the bottom of the hill leading up to The Trumpet. It had taken the last of their energy, wandering around in the white darkness of the growing blizzard, to find it, and if it wasn't for the fear and adrenaline dominating her system, Jess was sure she would've keeled over by now.

“Thank God we found it,” she said.
“I don't think I can get much colder. My

nipples could cut cake.”

Jerry stared at her chest.

“That wasn’t an invitation to ogle my tits. Just take my word for it, they’re cold.”

Jerry shook himself as if escaping a hypnotic trance. “Sorry! Well, it’s one thing finding the pub, but let’s hope somebody’s still in there. Else, I don’t know what we’re going to do. With the Siberian weather and Flame Boy on our tail, I don’t know what’ll kill us first.”

Jess shuddered.

“Sorry,” he said. “I know you’re scared.”

Jess didn’t admit it, but it was true. They were both fighting back the pangs of panic as their bodies continued to freeze. Jerry’s cheeks had gone clammy and looked like they were burning. She worried that if they didn’t get under cover soon they’d be in danger of getting frostbite or hypothermia.

Jess started to take the steps up the hill, sticking to where she imagined the path lay beneath the snow. She peered up at the pub, which looked back down at her ominously. “I think I see light in there.”

Jerry squinted. “Yeah, I think I do too. There must be people inside.”

The two of them hurried, taking steps as quickly as possible in the knee-high snow sloping upwards. As Jess got nearer the top, she became more and more certain that there was indeed light inside the pub. Not electrical light, but a flickering, glowing light from a torch or-“

“I think they have a fire in there,” said Jess, giddy at the thought of warmth.

“*Jurassic Park!*” exclaimed Jerry triumphantly. “Let’s get our black asses

in there.”

Jess’s brow wrinkled. “We’re not Black.”

“Will be if we get frost bite. Now come on!” He grabbed Jess by the arm and started helping her up the hill...

...but a noise from behind made them stop.

Jess heard it too. “Was that... growling?” She turned slowly as the low grumbling sound started up again. It did indeed sound like growling but, when she looked back, there was nothing other than the drifting, windswept snow.

She turned back to Jerry. “Let’s just get to the pub, okay?”

They picked up as much speed as they could, still hampered by the chilling embrace around their ankles and shins. When the growling started again it seemed to be coming from all directions, vibrating through the air all around them.

Jerry put his hand on Jess’s back and pushed. “I don’t like the sound of whatever’s making that.”

Jess was about to agree when she found herself off balance, her toe stubbing up against some hidden

brickwork or stone beneath the snow. As she crumpled, her leg twisted and folded beneath her, leaving her facing back the way she had come from. She shrieked at what she saw.

So did Jerry.

Chapter Fifteen

Harry snapped out of his wallowing, leapt up in front of the fire. “The hell was that? More screaming?” He started for the pub’s exit again. “What’s going on tonight?”

The others emerged from underneath their blankets and duvets by the fire. Steph hurried up beside Harry and put a hand on his back, clutching his jacket. “That scream sounded really close,” she said. “You think it was the same person as earlier?”

“I hope so, otherwise that means there’s something even more screwed up going on out there. A single person screaming is a lot better than multiple people screaming.”

The cries continued, closer and more urgent.

“Go on, Harry,” Steph urged. “It sounds like they’re right outside.”

Harry nodded and made for the door, but, before he managed to get there, it sprung open. Luckily, his forehead was nowhere near this time and he avoided a second blow from the

door's thick wood. Two flailing bodies – a boy and a girl – tumbled through the entranceway and ended up in a crumpled heap on the floorboards.

Harry saw that they were just a couple of teenagers. He offered them his hand. “Come on in why don’t you.”

The girl ignored his offer and sprang to her feet unassisted. She rushed over to the still-open door and slammed it shut, heaving her weight against it and sliding her arm up to the dead bolt, pulling it across with a forceful *Clack!*

Damien entered the scene and came up beside Harry and Steph. He looked

down at the teenage boy on the floor and then across at the panting girl slumped against the door. He laughed out round. “What the fuck are you two tripping about?”

The girl looked back at Damien, her chest heaving in and out beneath her fleece. Her eyes were wide like a rabbit on a motorway. She said nothing.

Damien turned his glance to the boy. “What about you, sunshine? You got anything to say, or shall I just kick your arse back outside? You’ve interrupted a private party and its bad manners to crash.”

“No,” the girl said urgently.
“Please, let us stay!”

Damien went to speak but Harry cut him off, confident that he would take a more appropriate line of questioning. “You can stay. Of course you can, but what on Earth has gotten you so freaked out?”

“There’s something out there, man” said the boy on the floor, still trembling on his back, but now propped up by his spindly elbows. “There’s something out there. Like a big fucking dog or something. It was like...like...*Jaws* with fur.”

There was silence in the room as Harry and the others studied the newcomers and considered their wild suggestions. The girl was nodding in agreement at what the boy had said and they both seemed startled half to death by something, but what they were claiming seemed like pure...

“Bullshit,” said Damien. “You’ve just shit yourself at a dog or something.”

Harry nodded, actually agreeing with Damien for once and finding the sensation strange. “It was probably just a stray, stressed out by the weather. I’m sure it’s unpleasant out there for anyone, dogs included.”

Harry watched patiently as the teenagers seemed to calm slightly, although both kept glancing back at the door, presumably to make sure nothing was trying to get in. After a couple minutes, the boy got himself up off the floor and put an arm around the girl, pulling her away from the door. They spoke between themselves for a moment but were too quiet for Harry to make anything out. *Boyfriend and girlfriend*, he supposed, before asking them, “Beer?”

This seemed to be just the ticket as the two youngsters started smiling. Yet, despite them relaxing, Harry couldn't

ignore the uncomfortable lump ascending in his throat, rising with the bile from his stomach.

It tasted like dread.

####

Jess watched the elderly man come from behind the bar with more blankets. Beside him, a huge, greasy-skinned man had a shopping bag filled with food – sausage rolls, chicken, ham, and stale-looking bread. The faint smell of meat

made Jess's mouth water as the blankets and snacks were handed out amongst the group.

“You say it was halfway between a Great Dane and a bull?” Kath asked her, sneering lips stuffed with porkpie.

Jess couldn't believe it when she'd found Kath at the pub. A spiteful part of her had hoped the old bag had gotten lost in the snow. Jess made a mental note to find out where Peter had gone when she had opportunity to ask. It wouldn't have surprised her if Kath had left him in the supermarket to guard it overnight in the freezing cold. Kath had it in for Peter more than she did Jess.

Kath cackled at her. “Well, *bull* is exactly what it is, young lady.”

“Yeah, as in *bull-shite!*” said a voice from somewhere else.

Jess sneered at the person who had spoken. “You’re Damien aren’t you?”

Damien’s face lit up. “You’ve heard of me? Well I guess you’d be a fool not to have.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of you. You’re the dickhead that gets high on smack and then tries to buy beer from the supermarket after licensed hours. Then,

when you get refused, you start causing trouble – knocking stuff over and threatening staff – most of which are female. Basically acting like an immature little boy. Same as you are right now.”

Damien’s smug expression dissolved into anger. The flesh in his cheeks changed from primrose to burgundy. “You better watch that mouth sweetheart. This is my pub and—”

“Actually,” said the barmaid lady (Jess thought she’d heard her name was Steph). “It’s my pub tonight, Damien, and we’ve all agreed to get along. That includes you, too, sweetheart. Don’t

poke the natives!”

Jess nodded. “You’re right, I’m sorry. It’s just been a bit of a head-fuck tonight.”

Damien smiled and held up his beer. “I forgive you, but only cus you’ve got a fit ass.”

“She’s like sixteen, dude! How old are you?” Jerry obviously took exception to the comment; he eyeballed Damien with suspicion.

Damien sneered. “You want to call your dog off, sweetheart? I was only being polite. Besides, I’m twenty-one,

mate, what's the issue?"

Jess turned to Jerry, hoping to show as much disapproval on her face as only a young woman her age could muster. "I don't need you to fight my battles, Jerry, and, for everyone's information, I'm seventeen - almost eighteen, in fact."

Jerry stepped closer and spoke in a hushed voice. "Sorry, it's just that I'm aware of this tool and he's bad news; a right wannabe gangster."

"I know," she whispered back. "Everyone is aware of him, which is why you should just stay out of his way. He's dangerous enough on a normal

day, let alone on a night where everything's gone to hell. Let's just finish our beers and try to stay out of his way till the morning when we can try and get hold of help."

Jerry nodded and re-joined the group who were resuming their position in front of the fire. Despite covering herself in several layers of blankets, duvets, and coats, there was no doubt in Jess's mind that it was getting colder.

"So, lass," said a handsome man with an Irish accent, "with a somewhat calmer mind, do you want to give us your yarn about the furry beast you say you saw outside?"

Jess didn't answer and instead looked quizzically at the other man, the one who'd offered to help her up off the floor when she'd first arrived. He was handsome too, but had a withered tiredness to his face.

“Oh, don't worry,” he said to her and smiled. “Lucas always speaks like that. You'll get used to it.”

Jess laughed. “Oh, well, I guess it was like you all said: Just a dog or something.”

Lucas frowned. Somehow his expression was clear to her despite the

lack of light. “Come now,” he said, “if that was what you thought at the time then you wouldn’t have burst in here screaming like a blind banshee. At the time, you thought you saw something. What?”

Jess was hesitant, nervous at the thought of bringing it all up again after she’d just managed to calm herself down enough to convince herself it hadn’t happened. “I er...I really don’t know. It was all so confusing.”

“It wasn’t a dog,” Jerry spoke up. “I’ve seen a hundred different breeds of dog and there’s nothing even close to what we saw tonight.”

The others switched their focus from Jess and listened to Jerry as he continued. *Don't tell them, Jess was thinking. They'll think we're both bonkers.*

“We’d just started to climb the pub’s hill,” Jerry said, “when we heard growling. It started off just like a dog’s, and that may have been what it was at first...but then it got louder. A dog can’t make your bones rattle like this did. We started to get our asses out of there, but Jess slipped over.”

“I tripped on something under the snow,” Jess explained, embarrassed.

“That’s when we saw it.”

“Saw what?” asked the elderly man. “What did you see?”

There was silence for a few moments and it became unclear who would be the one to answer first. Jess decided it would have to be her. “It was big – bigger than anything wandering around a council estate should be. It had thick, oily fur that was totally clean from snow, as though any flakes that tried to settle on it just melted. In a way, it really *did* look like a dog, but it was just way too big...plus its face was all wrong.”

Jerry supported her as her voice began to weaken. She appreciated it and had already started to consider him a friend. Relationships forged easily at times like this, she realised. “Yeah, I remember,” Jerry said. “Its face was much flatter and rounded – more like an ape than a dog, except its mouth took up half its face. It was full of teeth; rows and rows of them like those chomp-monsters in *The Langoliers*. You ever see that flick?”

Damien scoffed. “How could you make out all that detail in a blizzard?”

Jerry shook his head. “I don’t know. It was as though there was a

glow around it. A sphere of light.”

Damien shook his head, obviously not buying any of it, but said nothing. Jess saw a similarly incredulous expression on Kath’s face as well. *Screw you both*, she thought.

The others stayed quiet too, until Jerry finally said, in a croaky voice, “We haven’t even told you about the sick bastard that murdered my best friend – turned him right to dust.”

Everyone looked at Jerry.

####

When the teenagers, Jess and Jerry, had finished telling their wild story about a hooded figure turning their friend to dust, Harry was speechless. Of course, he didn't believe such a ridiculous tale – such a thing was impossible – but the story still managed to unsettle him. Whether or not it was true, *something* had obviously sent the kids running inside the pub.

Harry swigged his beer as he stared into the fire, listening to the conversations of the group rather than

participating in them. He tuned in to the sound of Kath who was busy berating Jess about what the girl had just told them.

“You silly, attention-seeking, twit,” the woman told the girl. “You’re just trying to frighten everybody. I’ve never heard such codswallop in all my life.”

Jess slapped her palms against her forehead in dismay. “I watched Jerry’s best friend die. If you hadn’t been too busy abandoning me then you may have been there to see it too.”

“How dare you! I did nothing of the sort. I shouted and looked

everywhere for you, but you'd wandered off carelessly."

Jess sneered. "Bollocks!"

"That is *it*, young lady!" Kath's voice quivered with rage. "Don't you bother coming in to work tomorrow because you are fired, young lady!"

Jess laughed. "We're in a pub, *Kathleen*, not at work. I can say what the hell I like to you. Don't worry though because I quit anyway."

"Music to my ears. Now I can employ someone with half a brain."

“Actually, you need to hire someone without a brain, then they won’t mind working for a pathetic bully like you. I understand though, Kathleen, it must be difficult being a spinster.”

“You spiteful little bitch! You know nothing about me.”

Harry watched as Kath threw off her duvet and leapt to her feet. For a second, it seemed as though the older woman was going to go for Jess, but instead she turned away from the group and departed towards the toilet.

“You two don’t get on then?” Lucas quipped from the edge of the group.

“No shit,” Jess replied. “Got to tell you though, it felt really good saying that to her.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” said Harry. “Maybe you should just let things lie for now though. Who knows how long we’ll be stuck in this situation together.”

“I know. I’ll leave her alone, so long as she doesn’t get in my face. I need to ask her where the warehouse guy went first though. She treats Peter like dirt and I need to make sure he’s alright.”

Jess shoved herself up onto her feet

and headed after Kath. Once she'd taken half-a-dozen steps, a body crashed through the window.

Chapter Sixteen

“Peter!” Jess screamed.

Harry watched the girl drop to her knees, scrambling over to the body now splayed across the pub’s wooden floor. The boy was barely conscious, covered in blood, and murmuring deliriously in a foreign language. Cold air flew in through the broken window and extinguished any minor warmth that had managed to remain inside the pub.

Harry clambered across the room,

skidded to his knees, and came to a stop beside Jess and the injured boy. *Did she say his name was Peter?*

Jess looked at Harry; a hollow stare consumed her delicate features, while tears dripped from her grief-stricken blue eyes and stained her cheeks. “Help him, please.”

Harry choked on his words. “I... I... What’s... What’s happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” cried Jess. “Just please make him alright.”

“*I’ll* tell you what happened,” said Jerry, rushing over to join them. The

others in the pub – minus Kath who was still in the toilet – stood on the periphery, watching. “It’s those demon-fuckers outside,” Jerry continued. “The evil monk and his pet dog.”

Harry blinked. “You’re speaking gibberish!”

“You reckon?” Jerry contested. “Then why don’t you tell me what can chuck a guy through a pub window like a ragdoll, huh?”

Harry had no answer and that worried him, but before he could send himself deeper into anxious musings, Jess shoved him hard on the arm.

“You’re not helping.” She beat her fists against his arm again. “You need to help him.”

“Okay,” said Harry, shaking himself into action and raising his voice. “Let’s get him someplace comfortable. I need someone to bring me blankets, bandages, anything like that. Is there a first aid kit here?”

Steph stepped forward and nodded. “There’s one in the back. I’ll go get it.”

Harry smiled, glad to have her help. When Steph rushed off, he turned to address the others. “Jess and I are

going to carry Jerry over to the couch by the fire. While I'm doing that I need the rest of you to get that window covered up before we all freeze to death."

There was a mumbling of agreement and everyone got to work. Harry slid his right arm underneath Peter's shoulders and instructed Jess to get his legs. She did so without argument. "We need to move slowly," he told her. "We don't know what kind of damage has been done, so easy does it."

Jess nodded agreement and the two of them shuffled their way across the bar, being careful to avoid twisting or

jerking the patient in their care. In the corner of his eye Harry was aware that the others in the pub were upending a table and pushing it up against the broken glass. He was surprised to see that Damien was also amongst the group; in fact he seemed to be the one taking charge.

Maybe he's not as selfish as he tries to show people he is.

“Okay, Jess,” said Harry, coming to a stop gradually besides the sofa, “you lower Peter’s legs and I’ll lower his body. Carefully does it.”

The two of them lowered Peter

down, an inch at a time, until finally, he was resting securely on the sofa. Amidst the glow of the fireplace, the severity of the boy's wounds became evident. Shards of glass protruded from deep gashes all over his body, poking through his torn clothing like alligator teeth. Harry also noticed that one of the boy's eyes had been mangled beyond repair. It looked like a squished cherry tomato and dripped blackish-red gunge down his cheek. Harry felt his stomach tighten.

Who the hell did this? Who could make such a mess of another human being?

“Peter, everything is going to be

fine now.” Jess spoke soothingly, stroking a hand across the boy’s forehead. “You’re safe and I’m going to look after you.”

Peter muttered something in reply but it made no sense, more of a gurgle than discernible speech. Harry continued to examine his body and was shocked to discover yet more wounds, more cuts, and more blood. Not to mention a broken ankle that seemed like it had been attached to the boy’s shinbone back to front, sticking out at a gruesome angle.

Harry placed a hand against Peter’s clammy cheek and shook his head.

“Who did this to you?”

Peter opened his remaining good eye and seemed to concentrate. He tried focusing on Harry but his eyeball kept flicking left and right as if it had a mind of its own. His mouth formed the words, “*Skrzdlaty Diabel.*”

Harry frowned. “Peter, can you tell me in English?”

The boy took a wheezing breath. It seemed to take every ounce of strength for him to form another sentence, but he managed to utter one more word: “Winged...”

“Winged what?” asked Jess, tears streaking her cheeks.

Peter gazed at her and almost managed a smile, like he had only just realised she was there. “Winged... Demon.”

Peter lost consciousness.

Jess went to put her hands on him, perhaps to shake him back awake, but Harry prevented her. “Let him rest.”

Jess leaned up against Harry. He could feel her shaking as she looked up at him. “What do you think he meant?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry honestly. “Probably just shock.”

Jess shook her head. “If it wasn’t for all the other things that have happened tonight I may have believed you.”

Harry hated to admit it, but he was inclined to agree with the girl. Something most definitely was wrong tonight. The thing that worried him most, however, was when he tried to imagine *what* and *why*?

“Harry?”

Harry spun around to find Steph

holding a green plastic box. *A first aid kit.* He took it and thanked her, but she didn't hear it, too busy looking down at the bleeding casualty on the sofa.

Eventually, her attention turned back to Harry. "Is he going to be okay?"

Harry glanced down at his shoes, then straightened up and took Steph to one side. He didn't want Jess to hear what he was about to say. "I don't know. He's been ripped to shreds and I think he's blind in one eye. I honestly don't know what could do this to a person....or why."

Steph's expression grew dim, her

skin becoming ashen even in the orange glow of the fire. “Are we in trouble here, Harry?”

“I can’t answer that; but I can tell you one thing, I’ve never wanted out of this pub so bad.”

Steph nodded. “I’ll go check on the others. Just do what you can for him, yeah?”

Harry nodded and turned back to the sofa. Jess was perched on the armrest, looking sick to her stomach. He wondered how close she was to Peter. Obviously they were co-workers, but were they more than that?

Isn't Jerry her boyfriend?

“How's he doing?” Harry asked her.

Jess shook her head and didn't speak.

Harry knelt down beside Peter. The heat of the fire pinched at the flesh of his back, making it itch. He placed the first aid box down on the ground and popped open the lid. Inside were the things one would expect to find: gauze, bandages, tape, alcohol wipes, and plasters. He also found an eye dressing which he plucked out of the contents

first.

After applying the dressing to Peter's damaged, oozing eye and securing it around the back of the boy's head, Harry moved on to the other wounds. He unbuttoned Peter's supermarket work shirt to get a clearer look.

Jess slapped a hand across her mouth.

At first, Harry wasn't sure what he was seeing. He unclasped the final button on Peter's shirt and pulled the fabric away. A film of glistening blood covered the boy's chest and stomach,

flowing from deep channels scored into his flesh. As Harry took it all in, he realised that the gashes weren't just random injuries.

“Someone's carved words into him.”

Jess looked like she could throw up at any moment. “W-what does it say?”

“Hold on.” Harry pulled a couple of alcohol wipes from the first aid kit and ripped them from their packets. He rubbed at Peter's wounds, clearing away as much of the blood as he could, fighting away fresh tides that sought to replace it. Slowly, the words became

clearer.

SEnD...

Out...

ThE...

S...i...N...N...e...R.

“Send out the sinner?” Harry said the words out loud, hoping his brain would come up with some interpretation that made sense.

“What does it mean?” Jess asked.

“I have no idea,” Harry replied –

and he didn't. In fact, Harry had no understanding whatsoever about the kind of monster it would take to carve words into someone's chest. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Maybe we should go get the others."

Jess agreed.

They dressed as many of Peter's wounds as they could and left him sleeping on the sofa, then joined up with the others who were still attending to the shattered window. They'd managed to stack two tables up against the broken glass and reinforce them with chairs. The long curtains had been pulled around the whole thing and the billowing

gust had been reduced to a whistling breeze.

“Good job,” said Harry, genuinely impressed.

Those at the window turned around. Each of them looked shaken and out of breath, even Damien. Kath was the only one that didn't appear to be bothered. Harry watched the woman, sat on a nearby chair, pick at her nails as though she had not a care in the world.

“Harry Boy. How's the nipper?” asked Lucas, appearing suddenly.

Harry rubbed at his eyes and let out

a sigh. “Not good. Someone’s made a real mess of him, blinded him, and cut words into his chest.”

Damien overheard this and stepped away from the window. “Someone carved words into him? That’s harsh, man. What’s it say?”

Harry shrugged. “Something about sin.”

Steph slid another chair up against the barricade, reinforcing it further. She turned to face Harry. “Sin? I don’t understand. What exactly did it say?”

“God knows,” Harry said. “Just

the words of a psychopath.”

Jess spoke up. “It said, send out the sinner.”

“The fuck that mean?” Damien demanded. “Does someone in here know what’s going on out there?”

Harry pointed his finger at Damien. “Calm down. It probably doesn’t mean anything. We just need to stick together and everything will be fine. No one needs to panic.”

Damien snarled. “Point your finger at me and I’ll break it off. I ain’t panicking, I’m pissed off. It’s obvious

that this is personal. Whoever's running around out there, like Freddie-Krueger-on-acid, has a grudge against someone in here."

"Nonsense," said Harry.

"Maybe not," Lucas chimed in. "You don't use a human being as a meat-memo-pad and hurl them through a window unless you're trying to send a wee message. Maybe what's happening tonight is all down to one person."

A silence fell over the group as they scanned one another suspiciously, trying to work out who was 'the sinner'.

Harry wondered if it was him.

Chapter Seventeen

Nigel Sutcliffe had sat and watched the unfolding situation for the last half hour. He'd retreated to the outskirts of the group to try and gain some insight into what was happening. Things had started out strangely enough that evening, if only for the unnatural weather, but when the lights blinked out, things got even more bizarre (culminating with a body flying through the window like an extra in a Bruce Lee movie). None of that particularly bothered Nigel though. What did bother him was all this talk

about the ‘sinner’.

He sat, shivering, on a stool by the bar, listening and watching as the others argued incessantly about what the injured boy’s chest carvings meant. Who was the sinner, they demanded, and who was it outside? Nigel decided it was a conversation he was better off avoiding because he knew that he indeed was very much a sinner. In fact, sometimes, he felt as though he was *born* a sinner.

But was he *the* sinner?

Maybe it was worry over nothing. Nigel didn’t care what happened to his

immortal soul. All that mattered to him was how much pleasure he could find in this life. The skinny bitch he'd fucked and murdered in Amsterdam last week had been a particular highlight. God how she'd screamed. *Especially when I went in the back door.* He smiled at the thought.

His reminiscing was interrupted by the arrival of Steph at the bar beside him. She handed him a beer and said, "It just about defrosted in front of the fire."

Nigel thanked her. "Just what I needed. Things are a little crazy around here tonight, huh?"

“Tell me about it!” Steph swigged from her own bottle. “I feel like I’m in a horror film. Still haven’t decided on an emotion yet, but I’m stuck somewhere between dazed and terrified.”

Nigel put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed; his pinkie ring slid over the fabric of her delicate blouse and stirred deep emotions within him. The gold ring featured a dolphin insignia at its centre and was his most prized possession: a memento of his first victim, a twelve-year-old blonde, pretty, with chubby cheeks like a prepubescent Drew Barrymore. He’d bitten it off her finger as she wailed and squirmed in the back of his lorry. He’d worn the

dolphin ring ever since, enjoying the way it felt on his penis as he masturbated over his dying victims.

“I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” he reassured Steph. “I think whatever’s going on tonight is personal.”

“Personal? You mean ‘the sinner’?”

The word made Nigel swallow a lump in his throat. “Whoever’s out there causing trouble obviously has it in for one of us; but you know what I think?”

Steph shook her head.

Nigel pulled his hand away from her shoulder, already missing the warm throb of her flesh. He picked up his beer and took a deep gulp before placing the near empty bottle down on the bar. “What I think is that this is a tiff over drugs. The only people I know sick enough to smash a kid to pieces and lob him through a window are smack-heads...and guess what? We just happen to have our very own aspiring drug lord right here with us.”

Steph looked across the room at the others then looked back at Nigel. “You think this is all about Damien?”

Nigel shrugged. “He’s the biggest sinner *I* know. Beat some kid into a coma last year, didn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” Steph admitted. “I heard that too, but whether or not it’s true...”

“Well it’s certainly within his nature from what I’ve seen tonight. He’s been glaring at Harry all night, plus he threw a punch at the Irish fella.”

Steph looked over at Lucas. “What do you make of him?”

“Lucas? It’s strange how he turns up for the first time on a night like this.

Maybe he's the eyes and ears for whoever's outside. Could be a drug lord looking to come into the area and put Damien out of business. Maybe they're making their move tonight because they're hoping the snow will keep the police away."

"You're really sure it's about drugs aren't you?"

Nigel shrugged. "I don't know anything for sure. One thing I *do* know is that if whoever's out there is looking for a sinner – and that's not me. I'm a decent, God-fearing man."

Steph laughed. "Good for you, but

I don't believe anyone's innocent one hundred per cent. No one's perfect. It's where people's hearts are that matters."

"That's a lovely way of seeing the world and it's no doubt why you're such a lovely woman."

"Nigel, you'll make me blush, you charmer." She gave him a quick hug around the waist. "I best go check on the others. There are more beers to hand out."

Nigel laughed. "Vital work, you best get started."

Steph walked away, leaving Nigel

to enjoy the sight of her lithe figure fading into the darkness as she left the candle-light of the bar. He kept his eye on her rump as it wiggled and shifted in her jeans. Nigel felt himself get hard.

Is tonight the night?

Nigel knew how lucky he was to be in the pub tonight. If he was on the road right now he would be fighting hypothermia in the cramped confines of his lorry's sleeper cabin. He felt even luckier for the opportunity he found before him tonight. The only reason he continued coming to *The Trumpet* during his days off was to see Steph...or, more truthfully, to stalk her. From the first

time he'd seen her alluring presence behind the bar Nigel knew he was going to have her. The more he watched her sexy little ass saunter around the bar, the more certain he became that he needed to have her soon. He'd just been waiting for the right opportunity.

And it's finally come around.

Tonight was the night. It had to be. The lights were off, the roads were closed, and a group of psychopaths roamed the streets outside. If he did Steph tonight, he could make it look like somebody else's doing with the slightest of ease. Even if the others *were* to find out...then he would just have to deal

with them. Even if he turned the pub into a blood bath, he could get in his lorry come morning and be a hundred miles away by the time anybody noticed.

Nigel put his hand in his trouser pocket and rubbed at the flick knife pushing against his throbbing erection. He grinned ear to ear.

Yes, my little prize, tonight is most definitely the night.

Chapter Eighteen

“What the hell do we do?”

Harry heard Jess's voice, but had no answers for her. Peter's condition was bad, that much was plain to see. He'd remained unconscious since they'd patched him up earlier and his condition had only seemed to get worse since then. His ruined eye was almost certainly lost. Medical attention was desperately needed, but when everyone at the bar tried their mobiles they were met only with static. Steph had found the

exact same thing with the pub's landline. With the snow outside, along with the boy's attackers, they were stranded, and alone.

“We just need to do the best we can for him, right now,” said Harry. “Then in the morning maybe we can go get help. There’s a main road nearby where we can wait for someone to drive past.” Harry could see the anguish in Jess’s eyes but was powerless to do anything about it. He wasn’t a doctor and could do nothing about the snow either. All the same, he felt like he was letting the poor girl down. Harry just hoped she didn’t see the flaw in his plan: that the main roads were closed and that nobody

would be driving by tomorrow, or probably even the next day.

“He’ll be okay,” said Jerry, coming over and placing an arm around her. “We just need to keep him warm.”

Harry watched the two of them walk back to where Peter lay and it dawned on him that his entire body was becoming numb from the cold. The only place in the pub left with any warmth at all was by the fireplace, and that was now taken up by their causality. Harry decided to move over to the bar and joined the others that had gathered there on the stools. Steph was busy handing out fresh beers.

“Got one for me?” he asked her.

Steph smiled. “Sure, Harry, here you go.”

Harry thanked her and took the stool beside Nigel, who himself was sitting next to Lucas, then asked the question that was on his mind: “Say, is anybody else wondering what we’re going to do for warmth now that Peter is taking up the fire?”

Steph winked at him. “Already on it. Damien and Old Graham are down in the cellar looking for anything we could start a fire with. I’m pretty sure I saw a

steel barrel down there once, so I was thinking we could stab some holes in it and use it as a furnace.”

Lucas laughed. “This gal is something else, don’t you reckon?”

Harry looked at Steph for a moment and their eyes met. “Yes, Lucas, she most definitely is.”

“You think the kid’s going to snuff it?”

The comment came from Nigel and Harry was taken aback by the man’s harsh wording. “What?”

“I overheard you talking to the girl,” said Nigel. “I could tell by your voice that you don’t hold out much hope.”

The negativity irritated Harry, but he assumed it was only natural in the situation they were all in. “I can’t say for sure – I’m not a doctor – but I know enough to see that the poor lad’s suffered more than anyone ever should.”

“You ever seen anyone in such a state before?” Lucas asked.

Harry conjured up images from his memory but quickly stopped himself. “No, I haven’t,” he lied. “I’ve never

seen injuries like it before, which is why I'm not sure if he'll last the night."

"Well then," Lucas replied, "perhaps we should be worrying more about whom – or what – did this to the lad. There's someone out there looking to do us all harm, and we've got enough on our plates with just the weather."

"I agree," said Steph from the other side of the bar, still assuming her job role was valid (in a way it probably still was). "I don't like any of this. I feel like we're cut off from civilisation. The phones are dead, the electric's off, we're freezing our tits off, and we can't go outside because some madman is

knifing people up. I don't even want to think what the rest of the country is like. I'm starting to get really freaked out."

"We don't know there's a madman outside," said Harry. "Perhaps Peter made an enemy and they've got what they wanted just by hurting him."

Nigel posed a question that made Harry's logic falter. "Why throw him through the window?"

"Yeah," said Steph. "If they wanted to kill Peter they would have been better leaving him to freeze outside in the snow. Throwing him through the window makes it pretty obvious they

were trying to frighten everyone in the pub.”

Lucas put his beer down on the bar with a *clink*! “Maybe it was a message for the sinner,” he said.

“More talk about this bloody sinner,” said Nigel, banging down his own beer on the bar. “Why are we buying into this bullshit? If someone is crazy enough to carve words into someone’s chest then I think it’s fair to say they’ve lost a certain amount of marbles – probably an entire play set.”

“You’re probably right,” Harry admitted. “How would we even know

who's a sinner and who isn't, anyway?"

“Exactly,” said Nigel, seemingly satisfied.

Steph pushed another recently-thawed beer over to Lucas, who was about to finish his current one. “We already spoke about that,” she mentioned. “Nigel seems to think that it's all about drugs, and that Damien is the one they want.”

“Well, well, well. Is that right, now?” Damien entered the bar area from a room in the back. Old Graham was stood behind him and seemed to be cringing. Harry cringed too when he

realised that Damien had just heard the accusation.

Damien stepped through the hatch at the side of the bar and ambled over to Nigel. “So you think I caused all this, do you?”

Nigel shifted on his stool. “I didn’t say that. I...I was just talking to Steph about who could be out there and... and...”

“...and you thought you’d blame everything on me? Why’s that then? Is it because you think you’re better than me? That I’m just some fuckin’ mug?”

“No, I just thought...”

“You thought shit!” Damien snarled, tensing up like a wild animal. “You’re a dead man.”

Nigel got off his stool and backed away. Lucas leapt up too and stood between the two. “I had your word,” he said to Damien.

Damien stopped his pursuit of Nigel and looked at Lucas. “What are you talking about, you stupid Mick?”

Lucas put a hand on Damien’s neck and pulled him in close. “I had your word that you’d behave – at least for

tonight. The only reason Nigel is looking to blame people is because he's afraid."

"Hey," Nigel protested.

"We're all afraid," Lucas continued. "If you're not then my hat is off to you, but the rest of us *are*. And when people are scared they run their mouth. It's nothing personal, just what people do to try and make sense of things. Stops their minds floating away with them."

"Yeah," said Nigel. "I don't know what's going on tonight. I was just talking shit. I figured that because

you're a tough guy, you'd have some tough enemies."

Lucas released Damien from his grip and stepped away. Harry wondered if Lucas had done so to allow a fight to happen, but all seemed okay when Damien remained in place. The young lad seemed to be thinking something over.

"You better keep your accusations to yourself from now on," Damien told Nigel, "because I'll tell you something: I'm bloody cold tonight, and kicking your arse would be a nice way to warm up!"

Harry was glad that, yet again, Damien had been reigned in. In fact, he started to wonder whether the thug was as unreasonable and bloodthirsty as people made out. He considered giving the lad the benefit of the doubt.

At least for now.

“Can we get a beer for Damien?” Harry asked.

Damien shook his head. “I’m good. I found a twenty foot high. The fire formed a wall around the pub like a fiery prison.

But is it meant to keep us all in?

Or to drive us out?

The fire was unnatural – *Impossible!* Ferocious infernos did not rise from the snow in any world that Harry knew of. What he was seeing could not be real.

But it was.

Either that or he was going insane.

What really terrified Harry, though, were the three crucifixes that sat within the flames, each with a struggling victim roasting alive. The screams had no sound, but Harry could see their agony as skin peeled and blackened on their

bones, leaving charred husks of flesh that were once arms, legs, and faces. It didn't take long for them to die.

Harry repeated Damien's words in his head and then found himself restating them out loud. "Big, big problems..."

Chapter Twenty-One

“I don’t understand,” said Harry, turning to face Damien.

But Damien had gone.

Where the hell has he gone? Is the horror show outside not interesting enough?

Harry looked back out of the window. The fires were still burning high, whipping back and forth in the growing blizzard while sizzling

snowflakes filling the air like locusts in a cornfield. It was bizarre and unsettling to see both unnatural flames and unnatural snow mingling in the same space, like two separate nightmares margining into one.

Harry started to feel like he was in a Salvador Dali painting. He needed to make sense of the situation, but should he tell the others? He wasn't sure, but was astounded by the fact that he wanted Damien's advice. Say what you wanted about the lad, he was calm under pressure.

But where has he gone?

Harry looked back out the window one last time before moving away. It seemed like a bad idea to take his eyes off the flames outside, but he couldn't stay there all night. Next to the exit it was freezing, and an aggressive breeze snuck under the door and rattled the wood on its hinges. Harry left the corridor.

Back in the main pub area, the others were still milling around, seeking out fuel for the furnace they planned to build. Nigel was busy tearing cushions from the chairs and snapping the legs into pieces, gathering them up on the bar in piles of wood and foam. Kath was gathering up beer mats. She obviously

didn't realise that they would burn only for about three seconds apiece.

“Hey, Kath,” Harry said to her. “Maybe we can find something bigger to burn?”

The woman shot Harry a look that for a moment made him feel like she wanted him to die. He shivered, but a second later was sure he'd just imagined it.

“I guess you're right,” she conceded, smiling at him politely. “I'll go search for something else.” She threw down the pile of beer mats and they hit the table with a *slap!* Then she

walked off towards the bar in a similar manner to what Harry would expect from a stropky teenager.

Odd lady!

There was still no sign of Damien. Harry tried to figure out where he had gone, and why so suddenly? Also, why had he chosen only Harry to lead into the exit corridor? It didn't seem that anybody else knew about the flames outside, which led him back to his previously unanswered question: *should I tell them? Will they just panic? Surely they have the right to know either way?*

Harry clapped his hands together, making a decision. “Everyone listen!”

Lucas and Nigel were nearby and focused their attention on Harry, whilst Kath reappeared from behind the bar. At the far end of the room, Jess stood up from the sofa, leaving Peter asleep under the watchful eye of Jerry. Harry moved into a spot that was roughly equidistant from them all. He put his hands together again and tried to find appropriate words. “I, um...I think there’s something that we all need to be aware of.”

“And what would that be, Harry Boy?” asked Lucas, lifting himself up

onto a bar stool. “Please tell.”

“Well...it’s, um, not easy to explain, but I think we can all agree that tonight is a strange night.”

“No argument there,” Nigel said. “I’m starting to get a bad feeling.”

Harry pushed himself to continue, his palms sweating. “I think we can agree that there are dangers tonight; I mean, beyond just the cold.”

“You mean what happened to that stupid boy, Peter?” said Kath in the kind of spiteful, bullying tone that Harry would expect only from a playground

full of children. “I’m sure whatever trouble he has gotten himself into was something he deserved. That doesn’t mean that *we’re* in any danger.”

“You bitch!”

Harry turned to see that Jess was storming toward Kath from the other end of the pub. Jerry strayed behind her but seemed unsure whether or not he should be following or staying put.

Lucas moved away from the bar to intercept Jess in the middle of the room. “Calm down there, lassie.”

“I swear to god, Kath!” Jess

bunched her hands into fists. “If you say one more thing about Peter – and I mean, *one more thing* – I’m going to scratch your goddamn eyes out. This happened because of you, because you allowed him to wonder off alone.”

Kath snorted. “I’m not his babysitter. He’s a grown man, and if he can’t look after himself then he should have stayed in Poland. God knows we don’t need his kind here.”

“You racist cow!”

“Call me whatever you like, dear. I’m only saying what most of the country thinks. Peter was probably just a petty

criminal like the rest of them. Tonight he got his comeuppance.”

To the obvious surprise of everyone, Jess’s small frame managed to get loose of Lucas’s restraining grasp and she leapt towards a nearby table snatching at the nearest thing she could find, which turned out to be an empty pint glass. Harry watched in awe as Jess flung the object in a sweeping arc through the air, pitching it with all the aggression of a baseball player seeking their target. It hit Kath’s with an almighty *thonk!*

Immediately, Kath hit the floor, clutching at her face and screaming, not

like an injured person but like...

A furious person, Harry thought.

Without delay, Kath rose to her feet, almost like a boxer rising after being knocked down by a fluky sucker punch, ready to start swinging. She was not happy and her blood-streaked face was a testament to it. "I'll kill you!" she vowed.

"Nobody is going to kill anybody!"

Everyone turned to find Steph coming out from behind the bar. Damien was with her as she confronted them all. "Now, what the hell is going on? And

why is Kath covered in blood?”

“The little bitch threw a glass at me. She’s insane.”

Steph turned to Jess with such ferocity that the young girl took a step back. “Is this true? Are you causing trouble in my pub?”

Jess nodded and took another step back.

Steph pointed a finger. “Go look after Peter, now, and if I see you move from there for the rest of the night I’ll throw you out in the snow myself.”

Jess moved so quickly it was almost a sprint.

Steph then turned to Kath. “There’s a first aid kit in the back, sweetheart, and a little kitchenette with a sink. Take a candle from the bar and clean yourself up. Okay?”

Kath still bristled with fury, but her bile-filled hate was beginning to simmer down. Not completely though. “That girl should be locked in a padded cell.”

Steph sighed. “Well, for now we don’t have that luxury, so the best I can do is keep you both separated. Jess will be staying up here so you should come

downstairs with the rest of us. Now, go get that blood cleaned up before it freezes on your face.”

Kath nodded unhappily and left the room, while Lucas and Nigel went back to their tasks. Steph and Damien approached Harry.

“What happened?” Steph demanded.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. I was trying to get everyone together so I could tell them something and it all kicked off. Those two really don’t like each other!”

Steph shook her head wearily. “Tell me about it. I’d call the police if I could. There’s no excuse for that kind of violence.”

“It wasn’t just Jess’s fault,” Harry told her.

“I don’t doubt it. But violence is violence; and on a night like this everyone is tense enough already.”

“Speaking of tension,” said Harry. “There was something I was trying to tell everyone before it all went haywire. Come with me.”

Steph nodded and followed;

Damien too.

Good, he can back me up. He already knows about the fire and the crucifixes outside.

The three of them made it over to the exit door in the rear corridor. Harry pointed to the glass panel. “Look through, but try to stay calm.”

“What do you mean?” Steph said. “You’re worrying me.”

“Just...look, and then we’ll talk.”

Anxiety etched itself across Steph’s face, but she obliged nonetheless,

moving up against the door and peering through the glass for several seconds. “Jesus Christ,” she said finally.

“You see! You see what I mean?”

Steph turned around to face him. “Course I do. The snow out there is getting insane. We need to wrap up warm or we’re all going to freeze. I don’t like this at all.”

Harry didn’t understand. He pushed Steph to one side and peered through the glass himself. The fire was gone. In fact it was as though it had never been there. The snow was deeper than ever and there were no shallow

areas where the heat of a flame would have caused it to melt. Everywhere Harry looked was cold, bleak, empty, and white.

But there was no sign of fire.

“There were flames!” He shouted it. “Flames everywhere.”

Steph looked confused and Harry didn’t blame her.

“Tell her, Damien.”

Damien shrugged. “What you talking about?”

Harry blinked and shook his head in disbelief. “What am I talking about? You saw it too! In fact it was *you* that showed me!”

Damien shook his head adamantly. “Think there’s a stripe missing off your Adidas, mate.”

“No,” said Harry, still shaking his head and feeling more and more desperate. “No, no, no. You saw the flames too! Why are you doing this?”

“Sorry dude! I think you got me confused with someone else good looking.”

Damien walked away, leaving Harry alone with a confused-looking Steph. He started to wonder if he'd imagined the entire thing.

No way!

“I swear it!” said Harry forcefully.
“Damien’s playing games.”

Out of the blue, Steph hugged Harry and whispered in his ear. “If you say there was a fire out there then I believe you, okay? Just don’t get yourself worked up, because I need you tonight. I would have gone insane if you weren’t here.”

“You really believe me?”

Steph nodded. “Yes! Now go make yourself useful. Old Graham was asking for you, so go see him. I’ll get all the toilet paper and hand towels. We’re going to get the fire going in a minute.”

Harry nodded and Steph left him there in the cold corridor, lost in thought about why Damien had not backed him up. *Just when I thought we were finally getting along, he makes me look like a lunatic, right in front of Steph. Stupid, Harry. Real stupid! You should never trust a snake.*

But Damien wasn’t worth the time

right now, not when Steph had made it clear she needed Harry's support. She was playing nursemaid, host, and authoritarian all at the same time. It was unfair that she had to put everyone else first when all they did was bicker. Harry wanted to take some of the strain off her, but for now he was being summoned to attend other business. Old Graham wanted to speak to him and Harry wasn't going to keep the old guy waiting. He owed him too much already. He started walking, but couldn't help thinking along the way: *Why did Damien lie?*

Before he exited the corridor something caught Harry's attention. At

the opposite end of the rear corridor was a light; it was coming from the pub's unused dance floor.

Is somebody in the back room?

Harry stepped forward cautiously. It was probably just one of the others, looking for something to burn; the light probably coming from their candles. He couldn't be sure though. He needed to check it out. "Hey, who's there?"

No reply. The light seemed to get brighter, pulsing rapidly.

Harry continued down the corridor, creeping anxiously as he awaited a

response. Once he was certain there would be none, he called out again. “I said who’s there?”

Again there was no response.

Harry was left with the decision whether to go back or not. Tonight was a night where strange things were happening in abundance; retreat was likely the most sensible option to take, yet for some reason Harry felt compelled to investigate further. His feet carried him forward.

The pulsing light was blinding now. Harry had to shield his eyes with a forearm as he took the final few steps towards the backroom. When he

eventually reached the doorway to the dance floor, Harry realised he was hot, sweating.

Inside the cavernous room it felt like a sauna, sticky heat clinging to his skin. After hours of freezing cold, the aura of warmth was wonderful, but Harry knew it was unnatural as well. There was no rational explanation for the backroom of an English pub feeling like a Mexican beach resort, especially when it was snowing outside like the end of the world. Something was wrong.

Rather than run away, Harry stepped onto the stiff wood of the dance

floor; it creaked beneath his weight. From the end of the room the bright orange glow continued pulsing. It was coming from behind an elevated DJ's booth built up against the far wall, but as Harry got closer the light began to weaken. He hurried over to the booth and hoisted himself up the three steps that ran beside it. The light was still diminishing, fading like a setting sun behind a forest. Harry had the feeling that if he didn't get a look at its source immediately, he would miss something important. He unhooked the latch of the DJ's chest-level door and pulled it open.

His heart stopped.

It started beating again a second later, but Harry was still unable to catch his breath properly. Looking down at the glowing visage before him, He did not know whether to laugh, scream, or give up and die. It was, at the same time, the most wonderful and most painful thing he could have ever have hoped to have seen. He choked back a sob, tried to find words.

A painful moment without air passed and Harry finally managed to splutter one word. "Son?"

Cowering before him, lit by a rapidly fading glow, was his son, Toby. The boy had not aged in the year-and-a-

half since his death and now stared at Harry with deep, soulful eyes.

“Daddy.” Toby’s voice was an echo, seeming to come from the walls rather than him. “Daddy, I’m scared.”

Impossible! An evil trick played by someone even eviler. Yet, somehow, Harry found himself speaking affectionately, “It’s okay now, Toby. Daddy’s here.”

The light around Toby had completely died. He looked like a normal six year old boy now. “You promise you’ll keep me safe?” The question bounced off the walls before it

entered Harry's ears.

Harry nodded. "Yes, son. I won't let anything hurt you. I'll keep you safe." He reached down to Toby, ready to take him up in his arms, but the boy shuffled backwards, out of his grasp.

"No, you won't," said Toby. "You can't keep *anyone* safe. Daddy was a strong man. He taught me to ride a bike and would buy me chicken nuggets whenever I wanted. You're not him, you can't be! He was strong, but you are weak. Weak!"

The final word did not echo; neither did it sound anything like his

son. The word had crackled and hissed from Toby's mouth like hatred personified. Tears fell from Harry's eyes. His son was dead, but the words of this monster were still true.

I am weak, Harry thought. I failed you, Toby. I let you get hurt, and all I've done since is feel sorry for myself.

The apparition of Harry's dead son was so accurate that it sent a chill through His bones. But it wasn't perfect. Now, as he looked down at the hateful creature, Harry could see the lack of humanity in its eyes. The dark vortexes swirled with dark knowledge and twisted intentions. It was an

abomination.

Harry backed away slowly. “I have to go now, Toby. I think you should go back to wherever you came from.”

The child looked at him with so much malice that Harry realised it was an entity far older than anything he'd ever encountered. It laughed spitefully; the booming sound filled the entire room.

“Running away is all you're good for, Harry Jobson. You watched your family die and have been running away ever since. You are pathetic, wasting

the life that He gave you. Death will be too good for you, but nonetheless it will embrace you soon. Leave this place Harry Jobson and be done with it. Your time is over. Reckoning is upon you.”

Harry didn't understand any of it, but he knew he had to get away. By taking the form of his son, it was obvious the creature meant to drive Harry insane, plucking at his grief like chords on a guitar. He didn't take his eyes from the DJ's booth as he sidled backwards along the dance floor, but it didn't stop Harry from noticing a new source of light growing behind him.

He spun around.

His heart stopped again.

Thomas Morris stood before Harry, slowly coming into focus as the glow around his image lessened. The man that took everything from Harry was now smiling at him like an old friend.

“Long time no see,” the apparition hissed like a serpent. “You’re looking...older.”

Harry said nothing.

“You really going to ignore me? With the history you and I have, I thought you’d have more to say.”

Harry spat. “I have nothing to say to you!”

The apparition laughed again. “You never were much of a talker. You prefer to let your actions speak for you, am I right?”

Harry shook his head. Whatever this thing was, it was not Thomas, and it could not hurt him. If it could, it would have done so by now, instead of dredging up things from the past. Harry stepped around the image of his enemy and headed for the exit.

Then hit the floor hard.

Thomas loomed over Harry, inhuman eyes filled with the same malignant intent that Toby's apparition had. "You will pay for your actions, Harry Jobson. Everyone will pay. It is time for...retribution."

Harry cowered on the floor. The thing had hit him, but how? Ghosts, hallucinations, apparitions: none of these things could manifest physically. Could they? The occult was not one of Harry's strong points and he decided not to hang around to find out. He leapt to his feet and headed for the door.

Thomas shouted after him, words

and tone both wicked with baleful intent. “You will die tonight, Harry Jobson. Death awaits you its cold embrace. Go outside and face it. Do not delay what is already certain.”

“Suck my balls!” Harry shouted back. It was a phrase he had never used before, but it summed up pretty accurately how he felt right now. He reached the door to the rear corridor and glanced back. It was something he knew would slow him down, but something he could not help.

Thomas was gone.

Harry sighed relief, but didn't relax

enough to trust the situation. He needed to get out of there, get to the others and tell them about the things he'd witnessed. He turned back around and faced the corridor.

This time his heart did not stop. He was becoming too used to the horrors of the night. Lying on the floor in front of him was his dead wife, Julie. Her body and face were battered and bruised, bones splintered and askew.

Like a car crash victim.

Harry looked down at the twisted form and listened to his heart scream. The final image of his wife's dying form

had always stayed with him, but never did he have to confront it face-to-face. Not since the night it happened.

Julie turned her head up towards him. Harry heard the broken bones scraping and grating against each other. She was the very personification of agony. “Harry,” she spoke in a condemning whisper. “Why did this happen to me? Why are you not with me?”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t have time for this shit anymore. This wasn’t his wife. Whatever it was, he owed it no explanations. “Because you’re dead, Julie.” He stepped over

the twisted, shattered body and headed
into the corridor. “And I’m not.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Damien wasn't sure why he lied; perhaps only because it was funny. Harry had made himself look like a right muppet in front of Steph and Damien couldn't help but laugh at the memory. *She ain't going to fuck you now, sunshine.*

Was that why he'd done it? *Because of Steph?* Did the thought of her and Harry copping off together irritate him? Steph wasn't like the usual girls Damien fucked. She was strong,

with a mind of her own, and took control of people in the same way he did. He admired that.

Fact that she's fit as fuck doesn't hurt none either. Too good for that drunk, Harry.

But it was more than simple jealousy. Damien had actually gained pleasure from Harry's predicament and that was what troubled him most. Over the last few hours, Damien had seen that Harry wasn't that bad a bloke. The guy's heart was in the right place, and it turned out that he *did* have a backbone after all. Despite all that, Damien still couldn't tolerate the way Harry always

played the wounded soldier. Always making people want to come up and ask if everything was okay. Always moping and drinking himself into a stupor. *Oh, poor Harry, they would say. That man is so full of pain and anguish, yet he still keeps going. What a guy!*

Damien scowled. *Screw that shit!* Everyone had it hard and Harry had no right to make out like his problems were worse than everyone else's.

He did lose his son though...

Damien shook his head and stood away from the now-cushionless bench he was sitting on. Nearby, Jess and Jerry

sat with the dying polish kid. Damien had chosen to stay nearby just in case the kids needed help. He'd been impressed by the way Jess had glassed the old bird giving her grief and respected her for it.

Took balls.

Damien sat back down on the cold bench and carried on his brooding about Harry. The man didn't deserve sympathy because Damien had it just as bad as he did. No one cared about his problems though. No one had ever given a damn when his dad was wasted and beat him black and blue. *Trying to toughen you up, boy! Teach you to be a man.* No one cared when Damien's dad

had made him deal drugs at ten years old. *No one will suspect a kid, so get yourself on that corner and don't come home till you've sold it all.* And no one cared when Damien's dad had tried to pin an assault charge on him.

The rage that flowed constantly through Damien's veins began to hot up. When his dad had gone to prison last year, Damien had felt free for the first time in his life. But it didn't last. He'd been ordered to take over operations and report to his father in prison daily. *Keep the money safe for me, Dame, for when I get out. Make me proud, son.*

Yeah, I'll make you real proud,

dad!

Damien thought back to when his dad had gone down, and what for. *Kicking the shite out of that lad until he was a whimpering, bleeding mess. Kid was no older than I was.*

Gazz Brown had been a tough kid. When he'd knocked Damien spark-out and taken his stash, Damien's father was not happy. Not happy at all. So, in a drunken rage, his dad – along with a group of the 'boys' – had taken Damien to go find Gazz. And find him they did. The well-built lad was at the back of a local supermarket selling Damien's supply to the warehouse workers. His

father saw red – had gone red. Like a wild bull, he tore into the youth, cracking bones and shattering teeth, stamping and kicking long after the boy's bonen edglangbiroSnangdec," she said. "They're building a fire downstairs anyway."

She rose up from her knees and patted Peter on the forehead. His skin was cold.

Over at the other end of the pub, Harry was standing with Lucas who'd come from downstairs to help watch over an unconscious Damien. Jess couldn't believe what Damien had tried to do to Steph. She knew he was a jerk,

but...

I dunno. Something just feels a bit off about the whole situation. Damien is a lot of things, but I never pegged him as a rapist. Still, how much do I know about the guy, really?

“Harry,” she said, approaching him by the bar. “The fire is struggling and we need something to burn.”

Harry nodded and rubbed at his chin. The stubble there made his face seem dirty. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “We’ll get it going again soon with some of the chairs Nigel broke up. I forgot to say earlier that I think I’ll have to leave

Damien over there with you and Jerry. The only other option is to put him in the cellar, but with Steph...”

Jess waved a hand. “That’s fine, I understand. We’ll keep an eye on him.”

Harry stared into her eyes. “You sure you’ll be ok?”

“Yeah, course. If he tries anything I’ll whack him with the fire poker or ring the bell. You tied him pretty tight by the looks of things anyway.”

Harry looked down at Damien’s swollen wrists bound behind his back and saw that he had indeed done a good

job. “I knew the Boy Scouts would come in handy one day.”

Jess laughed. “I knew there was something outdoorsy about you?”

“No,” said Harry. “That’s just the smell.”

Jess laughed again, this time louder. “You’re in a cheery mood despite everything.”

Harry seemed to stare into space for a moment before making eye contact with her again. “Guess I decided it was time to start taking part.”

Jess didn't know what he meant. There were a lot of things she didn't understand tonight. "Taking part in what?" she asked him.

Harry smiled. "Life, I guess. Now, let's go find you something for that fire."

"Sounds like a plan." She took Harry's free arm as he grabbed a candle from the bar. Lucas nodded to them both as they passed, letting them know he was happy to stay behind and supervise Damien. As the two of them sauntered towards the bar, Jess felt a surreal feeling of safety that made her wonder if she was in some sort of denial about the fear she'd felt only minutes before. It

was peculiar, but Harry's lightened mood made her feel that things might just work out okay.

Jess blinked twice and refocused her mind. Her skin felt tight under the prolonged attack of the cold and the chill felt like razor wire pulled tight around her flesh. She couldn't wait to get in front of a renewed fire and would get as much paper and firewood as possible before settling in for the night.

Maybe grab a little nap then if Jerry doesn't mind watching over me.

The fear that had been racing around inside of her for so long had

finally exhausted her ability to care, at least for the time being – perhaps while her mind recharged itself. Her emotions were being overridden by her physical needs for sleep and warmth. She shivered and yawned almost simultaneously as if her body wished to reiterate its demands.

Just a couple minutes now and I'll be nice and warm. Just a couple more minutes...

Jess descended the stairs to the cellar, Harry lighting the way with his candle. At the bottom they entered the cellar and were immediately met by Steph, who seemed to have recovered

partially from her ordeal. Old Graham lay on the floor under a blanket, seemingly drunk from the quiet little song he was muttering to himself and the empty beer bottles that surrounded him. At the edges of the room sat Nigel, partially shrouded in shadow from the lack of candlelight reaching him. Kath also sat nearby, but Jess didn't care to pay attention to that old cow.

Steph took a step towards Jess and Harry and it became obvious that she was still a little shaky. There seemed to be something she needed to say though. "We have a problem," she said directly to Harry as though Jess were not even there.

Harry's happy demeanour seemed to sour slightly and it made Jess feel unsafe again. *Please no more problems.* She thought. *Not tonight.*

Harry sighed. "Steph, you should be resting. What's so important that it can't wait?"

Steph raised an arm behind her and pointed to a makeshift fire in the centre of the room. The steel barrel was half-stuffed with flammable materials from around the pub, mostly cardboard boxes, some cushions, and wooden legs from the chairs upstairs.

Jess knew straight away what Steph was going to tell them and she didn't want to believe it. She shook her head in despair. "That's all we could find to burn, isn't it?"

Steph changed her focus to Jess and nodded solemnly. "The cardboard recycling was done yesterday morning and we're all out of coal. I was going to buy some from Kath's supermarket tomorrow to stock up. We have a couple of crisp cartons that went empty today, and some handtowels from the toilets. But even if we burn the tables it won't be enough for both fires. In fact it's barely enough for one."

Jess was still shaking her head as she blurted out, “We’re all going to freeze to death.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“What the Hell do we do?” asked Nigel from the floor, still shrouded in shadow.

Harry thought for a moment. “Steph, you’re absolutely sure that there’s nothing else we can burn? What about in Graham’s place upstairs?”

Steph shook her head. “Nigel already checked. It’s like a closing-down-sale up there. Barely enough furniture to fill one room. We’ll burn

what's there, but it's not much."

Harry thought again, shivering as he did so. He wondered whether he was as cold as he felt or if it was just his mind exaggerating. Before he had time to decide which, his musings were interrupted by Jess.

She asked a question, "What about the supermarket?"

Harry looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"Yeah," Kath chimed in from the other side of the room. "What do you mean?"

“I mean,” Jess said, impatiently, “that the place is full of, like, a thousand cardboard boxes, plus all the bags of coal in the warehouse. If we grab one of the trolleys we can cart it all over here. There’s painkillers and other stuff too that we could give to Peter.”

Old Graham piped up from his resting place in the middle of the room. “Don’t bloody forget about me!” he slurred. “I could use some pain relief too.”

Harry smiled. “Excellent. Then we have a plan?”

“Not yet we don’t,” Kath objected. “That is supermarket property you’re talking about. I can’t just let you in to ransack the place. It’s theft.”

Jess cursed out loud. “God sake, Kath, you still don’t get what’s going on, do you? Screw the supermarket! Our lives are more important.”

Kath snickered. “That’s debatable.”

Harry was starting to see why Jess hated the woman so much – she was wretched indeed – but before things got out of hand again, he decided to butt in. “Come on, the both of you. Fighting

isn't helping, is it? Enough people have already gotten hurt tonight.”

“Yeah,” said Kath, rubbing the swollen cut on her forehead. “I’m well aware of that, thank you very much.”

“Look,” said Harry in his calmest tone. “We’re lost without you here, Kath, and if you were kind enough to let us into the supermarket then we’d all be in debt to you. Our survival would most likely be down to you and we won’t forget that.”

Kath immediately seemed smug, as if her previously sour expression was just painted on and was now melting in

the heat of the candle she held in front of her. “Well,” she said. “I guess I can’t just let you all freeze, but I hope you realise the sacrifice I’m making. I have responsibilities that can’t be taken lightly.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “So, you’ll give us the keys?”

Kath laughed, as if he’d tried to convince her that the world was made of mashed potato. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “The store keys are to remain on an authorised key holder at all times.”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Steph.

“That should be obvious. I’m going to have to be present at all times. I’m coming along.”

Harry bit his lip, seeing no other way to proceed. *Great, I get to be escorted by Cruella Deville.*

“I also must insist,” Kath added, “that Jess is to remain here. Her employment was terminated earlier tonight and ex-employees are prohibited from entering the premises. Petty vindictiveness is all too common these days, I’m afraid.”

Harry caught the sight of Jess about

to explode and quickly moved the conversation on. “Okay, that’s fine. It’s too important that Jess stays here, anyway, to keep watch over Peter and Damien. We can’t risk her going outside.” Jess seemed to settle down, but Harry couldn’t help but wonder how long he could keep the two women from each other’s throats. *No time to worry about it now though.* He clapped his hands together, ready to get going. “Okay. Let’s get to work then. I’ll go ask Lucas if he’s up for the trip too. Nigel would you be okay to watch over the women and our two wounded?”

Steph laughed. “Oh thank you, kind sir. What would we ladies do without a

man to protect us?”

Harry leaned in close to her and spoke so that only she could hear. “After what you’ve been through tonight there’s no way I’m going to leave you on your own. Nigel’s a big guy and I’d feel safer with him around. It’s more for *my* peace of mind more than it is yours.” Steph seemed emotionally affected by Harry’s words but he didn’t have time to wonder about how she felt. He turned back to Nigel, who had now stood up. “You okay with that, Nigel?”

The big man nodded. “I’ll protect them with my life. You can count on me.”

Harry reached forward and shook Nigel's hand. "I know I can. Thank you. And if that thug tries to get free, you have all of our permissions to throw him on the fire."

Nigel nodded and Harry made towards the stairs, starting to climb them one by one. As he ascended, he thought about whether or not it was really a good idea to leave the modest safety of the pub. After what Jess and Jerry had said happened to their friend, Ben, and the fact that something outside was strong enough – and crazy enough – to throw a human being through a window, Harry was half-expecting to be met by

fire breathing dragons the moment he set foot into the snow. *Not to mention giant plumes of impossible fire climbing into the sky while people burn to death on crosses.* He tried not to think about it too much, but deep down he understood that something was very wrong with the world, or at least his small part of it. One thing for certain though was that they would all freeze to death without a constant fire going, so there was little choice really. Any way Harry looked at it, the risk of death was definitely better than the certainty of death. Whatever it was outside, he would have to face it.

It was time to start facing his problems.

“Harry Boy, I take it you’ve been informed of our grave situation?”

Harry entered the bar area to find Lucas still watching over Damien. “Yeah, they told me. Nothing’s going right tonight is it?”

“You can say that again. Still, I’m guessing you’re a fella with a plan.”

Harry nodded. “And you’d be right. Kath and I are going to go raid the supermarket for supplies. I wanted to ask you to come along.”

Lucas’ reaction was unexpected.

The man seemed afraid. “Well, um, you sure that’s the best course of action now, Harry Boy? Should I not stay here and keep an eye on the womenfolk?”

“Nigel will do that. Plus, Jerry is over by the fire with Peter.” Harry moved forward and placed a hand on Lucas’ shoulder. “I really need your help, Lucas. We need the bags of coal they sell at the supermarket and I won’t be able to carry them all on my own.”

Lucas shuffled uncomfortably, but slowly seemed to come round to the idea. “Well, okay, I guess. I have little choice in the matter, do I? Can’t let an honest fella like yourself down. Bring

on the snow, I say.”

Harry patted Lucas on the shoulder again. “I really appreciate it. Anyway, we’ll be fine. Quick in and out, military style. Like you said earlier, I’m Major Jobson and you can be Captain Fergus.” Harry snapped off a mock salute and stood straight.

Lucas chuckled. “Sounds like a plan. I just can’t help but worry about bumping into something unpleasant out there. I’m not the bravest man, you know?”

Harry understood the man’s fear; in fact he felt it himself. “I’ve been trying

not to think about it too much,” he admitted, “but it’s either a quick trip to the supermarket or waiting until we all freeze to death. Besides, we’ll go out there armed. Anyone – or anything – that tries it on will soon regret it.”

Lucas clicked his fingers and did a little jig. “I like your spirit, Harry Boy. When do we depart?”

Harry shrugged. “No time like the present.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A baseball bat and a handful of kitchen knives – that was the best they could do. Harry hadn't expected guns or a flamethrower, but still hoped for something a little more intimidating than kid's toys and cutlery. Still, what they had was better than nothing.

“Right,” said Harry, handing the baseball bat to Kath and arming himself and Lucas with a chef's knife each. “The plan is to get across to the supermarket quickly and quietly, sticking

together at all times. Once we get there it's over to you, Kath, because you know where everything is.”

Kath nodded and took over. “Our main priority is, of course, the coal, so we will gather that first. There's some on the shop floor, but it would be prudent to ignore that and get the main supply from the warehouse. However, once inside, no one touches anything without my say so.”

“Would you mind if we breathe the air,” said Lucas.

Kath planted her hands on her hips. “If you're not going to obey my rules

then we can just forget the whole thing.”

“Fine,” said Lucas. “Although, we could just tie you up like our young friend, Damien, and take the keys for ourselves.”

Kath stared at Lucas and seemed worried.

Lucas chuckled. “Just pulling your leg.”

Harry slid off his stool and straightened himself up. “Okay, Nigel, you keep an eye on everything here and we’ll be back as soon as we can. Jerry, you make sure that Damien stays tied up

nice and tight.”

“No,” said Jerry. He was holding the fire poker down by his thigh and shaking his head. “I’m coming with you.”

Before Harry had time to object, he found that Jess had beaten him to it. “Are you insane?” she asked her friend.

Jerry was still shaking his head. “No, I’m not. Just tired of being useless. That’s all I ever was when Ben was around and I’ll be damned if I’m going to carry on being like it now he’s gone.”

“That’s very noble,” said Harry, “and we all understand you wanting to honour your friend, Jerry – but there’s no need to take the risk. We’ve got it covered.”

“Dude, I don’t really know you and you sure as hell don’t know me, but one thing you’ll learn real soon is that all of the shit me and Jess told you about is real. None of you have seen the dude in the hood up close, but I have.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “What’s your point?”

“My *point* is that I am more qualified than you to go out there and

face the crazy, so what right do you have to tell me anything?”

Harry shrugged and started to wonder if he actually had the energy for this. “We don’t have time to argue,” he said wearily, “so I guess you’ll be coming along too.”

Harry watched Jess put a hand on Jerry’s shoulder and turn him to face her. He couldn’t hear their conversation so he decided to take the remaining time to check up on Steph. She stood behind the bar, relighting any candles that had gone out.

“You okay?” he asked her.

“You’ve been through a lot tonight.”

She smiled at him, her features so delicate and faded that she almost seemed like a shivering ghost in the candlelight. “No more than normal,” she said. “This place was never exactly Disneyland to start with.”

Harry took her hand and felt a jolt run through his skin when he felt her squeeze back. The room was freezing, but her palm throbbed out heat. He smiled at her. “You don’t have to pretend, you know?”

Steph’s eyes welled up as though a tap had been turned loose somewhere

inside of her. “You mean I should just be honest and say that I think we’re all going to die tonight?”

Her words hit Harry like a haymaker to the kidneys. Just when he’d started to find some strength and positivity inside of himself, Steph had lost hers. It was tragic because he knew that his strength had, in part, come from being around her positivity. He’d taken advantage of Steph’s emotional strength and now the poor girl was drained. He squeezed her hand tighter. “No one is going to hurt you, Steph. I promise. I agree that some weird business has been going down tonight, but things only seem bad because we’re all afraid.”

Steph laughed and wiped at her nose and face. The skin of her wrist glistened as she pulled it away. “There’s nothing to fear but fear itself, huh?”

Harry smiled. “Something like that.”

“You just get back here in one piece, okay! Then I’ll stop crying.”

“Okay, deal!”

Steph let go of Harry’s hand and pushed him away. “Well, get going then.”

Harry turned around. The others were waiting; Jerry, Kath, and Lucas forming an orderly queue by the door. Lucas still seemed reluctant to go outside and Harry wished he had more time to find out why. But time was something none of them had while temperature continued to drop. Crisp layers of frost had started to form on the wooden surfaces of the tables and a pile of snow had formed at the foot of the exit door. The weather was coming in to get them.

Harry moved to the front of the queue and placed a hand against the lock, ready to unbolt it and push open the

door. For one quick moment, Harry lost the nerve he needed to continue, but he took a breath, swallowed, and managed to continue. “Let’s go,” he said, pushing open the door and stepping out into the snow.

####

Outside, the landscape was featureless and blank like an unused canvass. Harry looked about himself but could see nothing but whiteness, so pure that its gleaming intensity made his

eyeballs ache. But despite the blankness, there was movement everywhere; shifting, dancing specks of snow fluttering in the air; each flake individual but also part of the same never-ending whole. Harry thought about rushing back inside the pub, regretting the whole idea, but when he looked over his shoulder he could no longer see it.

Lost already!

Lucas, Jerry, and Kath were following closely behind, linking arms to form a human chain. All of them seemed worried by what they were seeing; they were looking for Harry to

lead them.

*But lead them where exactly?
These people's safety is in my hands
and I don't even know what to expect.*

“You alright there, Harry Boy?”

Harry turned to Lucas. “I’m just... thinking.”

“Well, perhaps you’d like to do your wonderings some place a bit warmer. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but it’s a tad cold out here this evening.”

Harry nodded and got moving, the others shadowing him tightly. The snow

enveloped each of them past their knees, which led to them almost *wading* rather than walking. It wouldn't be long before the snow was deep enough to swallow them all whole. The effort of every step left them panting. They moved in silence, too laboured to speak.

Several minutes passed.

The snow went on forever.

Then: “Do you have any idea of where we’re going?” Kath shouted from the back of their human chain, struggling to be heard over the howling wind. “We should have been there by now.”

She's right. Harry had been thinking the same thing just before Kath voiced it out loud. He'd gotten them lost in conditions cold enough to freeze a penguin solid.

“We’re lost aren’t we?” said Kath, accurately reading in on the meaning of Harry’s silence. It had been more an accusation than a question.

Instead of Harry answering, Jerry did so for him. “Yes, we’re lost,” he said, “but Harry’s not to blame.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean I’m not to blame?”

“I mean that the *snow* made us lost.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Kath. “You sound just like that silly girl back at the pub.”

“Come now,” said Lucas, stopping and halting everybody in the line. “Let’s hear the boy out.”

Jerry prepared to give his explanation and the others gathered around close, all of them shivering except for Lucas who was coping slightly better. “It’s not normal snow,” Jerry explained. “It’s a magic snow.”

Despite the brevity of the situation, everyone started laughing.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” said Jerry, deadly serious despite their mockery, “but I’m telling you that this snow is unnatural. It’s a force being wielded by a force even greater.”

Harry decided to humour him. “Wielded by whom?”

“Who you think? The guy in the hood. The snow is just his tool to trap us or get us lost and confused. Then he comes to take us like he did Ben.”

“Okay,” said Harry, trying his best

to remain open-minded. “But, if you believe that, what the hell are you doing out here?”

Jerry smashed a fist against his open palm. “Because me and the guy in the hood have unfinished business. If he turns up, I’ll be the one to face him while the rest of you make a run for it.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Harry asked, seriously considering that Jerry may have lost his mind. He was a teenaged boy, not Rambo.

But Jerry seemed more than sane as he continued. “I need to take some responsibility instead of letting other

people do it for me. If this is the end of the world then the least I can do is make it hard for the bastard that started it. I'm going to give him the ass-kicking of his life."

"Erm...fellas?" The group turned to face Lucas, who was looking unsettled. "That *bastard* in question," Lucas pointed over Harry's shoulder, "is right over there."

Harry spun around to see a shape in the distance. The dark silhouette of a man taller than a man had right to be. It was coming towards them, slowly and methodically, as if it had all of eternity to get there. In the last year there had

been numerous nights where Harry had drifted out of a nightmare and woken up with a stinking hangover, but this was the very first time he had ever felt as though he were drifting *in* to a nightmare.

And the nightmare was getting closer.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I better go check on Old Graham,” said Steph, leaving Jess and Nigel to look after Damien and Peter. Jess had started to feel desperately lonely since their numbers had halved. She just hoped the situation was temporary and that the others would return soon. *Everyone except for Kath, that is.* Jess wouldn’t care if she ever saw that woman again. She turned to Nigel. “Best settle in. It’s already been a long night.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Nigel replied.

The two of them slid down either side of the fire, leaving the middle clear so that its warmth could reach Peter on the sofa. Damien was still tied to a chair nearby, not as close to the fire as the rest of them. They'd dumped an assortment of blankets on him to keep him warm and he now looked how Jess imagined a geriatric, old woman would look knitting in front of the fire. She pulled a nearby duvet up over herself and let out a shiver.

“Not getting any warmer is it?” Nigel commented. “Don't they say you should all huddle together to share

warmth?”

“Yeah,” Jess agreed. “They do say that.”

Nigel patted the floor beside him. “Well? You want to come over?”

Jess tried to work the offer out. What was he suggesting? Nigel seemed like a nice guy – *shy*, if anything – so she assumed he was just being practical rather than intending anything else. Still, the suggestion made her uncomfortable.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m warm enough for now, but thanks for offering.”

For a half-second, Jess thought she saw anger flush Nigel's face, but when he spoke, she realised it must have been her imagination. He was harmless.

“Don't mention it,” he told her. “I just don't like to see a young girl suffer.”

Jess giggled. “What a gentleman.”

“Unlike some.” Nigel nodded towards Damien.

Jess thought about that for a moment. Something still didn't sit right about what had happened earlier. “I still can't believe that he tried to hurt Steph.”

“Well, believe it! The guy’s a fucking animal and he’s lucky I didn’t kill him.”

Jess was taken aback. “Wow! Calm down. I was just saying it was a shock, that’s all.”

Nigel rubbed at his eyes and shook his head. His gold pinkie ring glinted in the fire light, the image of a dolphin shining for a split-second. “Yeah, course...I’m sorry. I’m just so angry that I wasn’t there to stop him sooner.”

“You stopped him soon enough,” Jess told him. “He never got to hurt Steph. Well, not in *that* way, you

know?”

He nodded and smiled, yet something about the gesture made Jess feel uncomfortable. It felt as though she were being looked at through a mask. That perhaps Nigel's smile was just a way of hiding something else.

But what?

“Do you mind holding down the fort for a couple minutes?” Jess asked. “I just want to see if Steph needs anything.”

Nigel's smile never faltered. “No problem,” he said, looking her in the

eye.

Jess shivered again; she was certain it wasn't because of the cold. She stood up and hurried away, glancing back over her shoulder to check that she wasn't being followed. Past the bar, she approached the darkness of the staff corridor. Jess felt even more than that something wasn't right about Nigel, but her final glance back showed that the man was still seated in front of the fire. He wasn't following. Jess felt stupid and paranoid. Nigel didn't seem like he could hurt a fly.

Neither do frogs until they shoot out their slimy tongues and pull you in

and swallow you whole.

When Jess stepped into the cellar doorway at the top of the stairs, she immediately felt the warmth from the fire below, flowing up and over her face. She shuddered at the pleasant feeling and started to take the steps downwards.

At the bottom, Steph sat near the barrel-fire with Old Graham. The two of them were chatting away like they didn't have a care in the world. Steph looked up at Jess as she approached and asked, "Everything good up there?"

Jess shrugged. "I wouldn't describe anything as good at the moment,

but things are...stable.”

“How’s Peter?”

“Bad. I don’t know what to do for him. I’m hoping that the others come back soon with medicine or something to help.”

Steph bit her lip. Her face was swollen on one side where she’d been attacked and her right eye was half-closed. Jess wondered quite how much Steph had been affected by tonight’s earlier incident. It was obvious she was trying not to show her emotions, but the feisty barmaid didn’t seem quite as tough as usual. “Are you okay?” Jess asked

her.

Steph seemed to snap out of a trance. “I’m fine. Just a bit worried, I guess, but that’s to be expected, right?”

“Hell yeah. You’d have to be made of stone not to be worried tonight. Speaking of which, how well do you know Nigel?”

Steph looked confused. “Nigel? Pretty well, I guess. Why?”

“He just makes me feel a bit uncomfortable.”

Steph shook her head. “He’s never

caused any problems in the eight or nine months I've known him. Keeps to himself, more or less."

"A nice guy...f-from...what I seen...tonight." Old Graham had fallen into a drunken haze, but still managed to fade in and out of the conversation. "A nice...guy."

"Maybe, I'm just being silly," said Jess.

"I'd say so. The guy saved me from being raped tonight!"

Jess nodded. There was a good chance she was just paranoid as she'd

suspected earlier. Having Steph confirm it made her feel much better. She would go back upstairs now and look after Peter, thinking no more about it. But first she wanted to check on Steph's injuries. Someone needed to look after *her* too, especially after what had happened. "Let me have a quick look at your face, before I go back upstairs. You look pretty beat up."

Steph waved a hand. "Don't worry. Just a bruise."

"I'd feel better all the same." Jess slid down onto the floor besides her.

Half-asleep, Old Graham

murmured something from the floor.
“Let the girl...have a...look.”

Steph sighed and leaned forward.
“Fine, just keep your hands away. It hurts bad enough as it is.”

Jess leaned forward slowly and cringed at the sight of Steph’s bulging cheek. Her misty blue eye above the injury was bloodshot and teary. A second injury on her forehead seemed just as painful. A throbbing, aggressive bump that was already turning purple.
“Jesus, you really took a whacking.”

“Think I fell against the toilet bowl. Don’t really remember much

more than that. Someone came out of the dark and hit me.”

“You don’t remember anything at all?”

Steph sighed. “No.”

She went to move her head away, but Jess stopped her. “Hold on a sec.” She looked closer at the wound on Steph’s cheek, suddenly noticing something as her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the cellar. It was something at the centre of the bruise, lighter in colour than the surrounding tissue. It formed a shape, maybe matching the surface of whatever had hit her. The

outline seemed to resemble a...

...

Jess' eyes went wide.

A dolphin.

The image was familiar and Jess scratched at her head while she tried to understand why. What could have hit Steph in the face that featured a small dolphin shape?

A ring with an engraving on it, maybe?

Jess's breath caught in her throat at

the realisation. “Holy shit! Nigel!”

“Did I hear someone say my name?” Nigel was walking down the stairs into the cellar.

Jess’s stomach cramped as she tried to think of something to say. All she could come up with was: “Hi, Nigel. Yeah, we were just talking about you. Steph just told me what nice guy you are.”

Nigel smiled at her. Jess finally understood what the expression was designed to disguise. It was indeed a mask.

Intended to hide a monster.

####

When Jess suddenly excused herself, Nigel had been concerned. Maybe his fumbled attempt at getting the girl to sit beside him had eroded the harmless veneer he worked so hard to maintain. It was possible that Jess had seen his true intentions.

Now, as Nigel entered the cellar, he wasn't entirely sure. Jess certainly

seemed jumpy at his presence but, considering the events of the last few hours, that was perhaps understandable. Steph seemed glad to see him, however, that much was clear; she'd smiled and waved a hand at him when he'd approached. It wasn't surprising she trusted him. After all, he'd been working on gaining her confidence for the last eight months. As far as Steph was concerned, he was as harmless as a three-legged kitten with pneumonia.

Dumb fucking whore.

It didn't matter if Jess suspected anything. They were both just his prey now; more victims to add to his mental

highlight-reel of rape and torture. He figured he had at least an hour to have fun with them before he'd have to slit their throats, stash the bodies, and take a finger for his collection (and that was only if Harry and the others managed to make it back from the supermarket without freezing to death). Even if they did come back he'd have a story ready for them (and his trusty flick knife ready in his pocket just in case they didn't believe it).

“Everything okay?” Jess asked him, still not giving away whether or not she suspected anything. “Shouldn't someone be watching Damien and Peter?”

Nigel nodded, trying his best to look solemn. An emotion he couldn't actually *feel* at all, but one he felt he was adept at emulating. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, sweetheart. I think Peter's waking up. I heard him say your name."

Jess didn't react for a moment and Nigel wondered how well his lie had gone down. Finally, she replied, but made no attempts to get up and join him. "That's wonderful," she said. "Great news."

"Well," said Nigel, offering out his hand, "you going to come see the poor

lad or not? I'm sure you're the first thing he'd like to wake up to."

Jess shifted uncomfortably as if determined not to get up. Eventually she had no choice but to concede.

"You're right," she said. "Be right there. I just need to talk to Steph about something first. Girl problems, you know? So, did you want to meet me up there in five minutes or so?"

She's trying to warn Steph, the little bitch!

Nigel closed his eyes and fought away the urge to rip the girl apart right

there and then, tasting her wet insides as she gulped her dying breaths. He had to work *real* hard to control himself and keep his cool. He would be nowhere without his *control*. Far better to have fun once everyone was tied up and under his power. That way there could be no surprises and the party could really get started.

“I think you should probably come now,” Nigel suggested, keeping his voice soft so as not to alarm an unsuspecting Steph. “What if he doesn’t make it and this was his last chance to speak to you, Jess?”

Steph placed an arm around the

girl, before frowning directly at him. “That’s a little bit harsh, Nigel. Let’s not condemn the poor boy just yet.”

“Thanks,” Jess replied.

“I do agree with him though, honey. You should go right away. Peter hasn’t been conscious much tonight and you wouldn’t want to miss out on anything he could tell us about what happened outside.”

Nigel grinned. *That’s a good girl. Always so eager to help daddy, aren’t you? Just like when you knocked yourself out for me in the toilets.*

Nigel reached his hand out further to Jess. “That’s what I was trying to say. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sure Peter’s going to be just fine, but right now he needs you.”

Jess looked like one of the cats Nigel used to strangle as a child (before he moved onto women and children). Trapped and terrifyingly aware that death was quickly approaching, yet powerless to do anything about it. The girl was afraid; the sight of it made Nigel’s cock throb. He liked it so much better when they knew it was coming.

Love that look in their eyes.

Jess started getting up, ignoring

Nigel's outstretched hand and rising tentatively, as though she expected a strong wind to blow her over at any moment. Nigel moved back and waited patiently by the stairs for her. To his irritation, Jess instead turned to Steph and held out a hand. "Will you come with me?"

Don't even try it! Just take what's coming to you and stop making things hard.

Nigel was relieved when Steph shook her head. Jess seemed to deflate like a leaking balloon.

"I can't," Steph told her. "I need to

stay here and look after Old Graham.”

“But he’s asleep,” said Jess, the pleading and desperation in her voice was clear to Nigel. *But is it clear to Steph?* Much to his dismay, Steph did indeed seem to pick up on the girl’s veiled pleas and was now staring at Jess as if trying to work her out. Nigel held his breath, waiting for the outcome.

“Okay,” said Steph. “I’ll come with you, but we’ll have to be quick.”

Damn it!

Nigel stood, irritated, as the two women huddled up and waited for him to

lead on. It was obvious Steph had picked up on something in Jess's tone, but he doubted she suspected anything specific, anything close to the truth. She knew something was up, but, as long as he didn't leave the two of them alone, she wouldn't figure out *what* until it was far far too late.

Nigel started to creep up the stairs, making sure the women followed. He kept his steps slow so that Jess couldn't fall behind and whisper something to Steph without him hearing. When they reached the top, he stepped aside and ushered the women past him. From behind, he moved them into the candlelight of the bar and was

immediately hit by the sub-zero temperature. It wasn't even biting cold any longer, but a far deeper sensation that his very blood was turning to ice in his veins. "Come on," he said, "let's get over to the fire."

The women walked ahead and he kept close behind, rubbing his palms against his arms to try and generate some friction and heat – but the only thing getting him *hot* right now was watching Steph move. He thought about all the things that he could do to that sexy, slender body that would warm him up for the rest of the night. The only thing left to figure out was the best way to take Jess out of the picture. For now he'd let

things play out and wait for an opportunity to present itself. The flick knife in his pocket made Nigel consider just stabbing the girl and being done with it, but that would be a waste. He had to have his fun with her first. If Steph was going to be the main course, then Jess would be dessert. *I'll eat her nipples as cherries*, Nigel thought as he let slip an excited laugh. He quickly stifled it when the women looked at him.

“Something funny, Nigel?” Steph asked.

He quickly shook his head. “Just the craziness of tonight making me a little loopy. I get the giggles when I’m

nervous.”

“And why would you be nervous?” Jess asked in a tone that he didn’t like at all. It was almost goading.

“Well,” he said, “there’s a lot to worry about tonight, isn’t there, sweetheart?”

Jess took a step backwards and was nodding as though she knew a punch-line to a joke that no one had told. Nigel felt his blood pressure rising as he fought the urge to rip into the girl and punish her insolence. She kept her eyes fixed on him as she continued stepping backwards. Steph was

watching from a few feet away, visibly unsure of what was about to unfold. Nigel took steps of his own, keeping pace with Jess.

Like a predator stalking its prey.

“Or are you nervous,” Jess said, “because you lied about Peter being awake? Look at him, he’s still unconscious.”

Nigel grinned. *Of course* Peter was still unconscious; the kid was as good as dead. He looked down at the boy and had to stifle another laugh. *Pity he isn’t awake. He could have watched while I fuck his girlfriend.*

Jess took another step backwards, placing herself up against the wall beside the fire. No more space to retreat. Nigel continued approaching.

You're trapped now, bitch.

“Or,” Jess continued, “are you nervous because I know that you’re the one that tried to rape Steph?”

Nigel looked at Steph and watched the sudden shock wash over her. She took a sharp intake of breath. Jess’s revelation had sucked the wind out of him as well. He’d expected her to try and blow his cover, but the fact that

she'd done right in front of Steph hurt him. Nigel hadn't wanted Steph to know the truth about him until the very last moment.

*Nothing to be done now though.
Time to start ripping flesh.*

Nigel lunged at Jess like a snake uncoiling. Such momentum did he have that he was powerless to change direction as the teenaged girl swung at him with the fire poker she'd somehow grabbed from its rack without him seeing.

The last thing Nigel thought as the steel rod arced towards his skull was...

Chapter Thirty

“You want another piece of me, huh? Well, if it’s Mortal Kombat you want then that’s exactly what you’re going to get, you cross-dressing freak.”

Harry managed to reach out and grab Jerry just before the lad ran off to his peril. “Hold it,” he said, clutching the boy by the collar.

Jerry struggled to get free. “Dude, not cool. Let go of me. Him and me have got a date with destiny.”

Harry shook the lad. “This isn’t Star Wars and that’s not Obi Wan Kenobi.”

Jerry looked outraged. “Obi Wan is one of the good guys, you dork!”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “*I’m* the dork.”

“Fellas, while I’d love to have a discussion on the many wee sides of the force, I think we should get going, pronto.”

Harry nodded to Lucas and then looked into the distance at the approaching figure. “Okay, let’s get

back to the pub.”

Everyone agreed. They turned,
ran...

...and stopped in their tracks.

“Holy shit!” Jerry cried out as ten foot flames exploded from the snow before them, cutting off any chance of escape. Harry felt the heat spread out in a wide semi-circle around them, leaving no place to go but towards the tall, hooded figure.

Jerry put his fists up. “Time we entered the Thunderdome.”

“You reckon we should fight?”
Harry asked.

“You got a better idea?” Kath
queried.

“Don’t suppose anybody has a fire
extinguisher?” Lucas asked, fanning his
hands against the fire behind them.

Harry took several steps forwards.
It was probably a stupid idea. “What do
you want from us?” he demanded. The
hooded figure stopped moving, still too
far buried by the blizzard for Harry to
make them out clearly. Despite that, he
could feel the stranger’s stare boring
into him, digging out the corners of his

soul. “I said, what do you want?”

Silence.

Then: “WE HAVE COME FOR...
THE SINNER.”

Harry shook his head. *What the fuck is with this guy? Did he overdose on bible studies as a kid?*

“Who exactly is the sinner?” he asked.

More silence.

Then: “YOU ARE, HARRY
JOBSON.”

Harry fell down, for no other reason than his knees had ceased function. He flopped, face-first into the snow like an awkward clown, dreading he would never get up again. *He* was the sinner? *He* was the cause of this madman wreaking havoc tonight? It seemed insane, but...

He knows my secret; knows what I've done. He's right...I am a sinner. But how did anybody ever find out?

“Come on, Harry Boy, time to go.” Lucas lifted him up, and at first Harry thought it was to turn him in to the hooded stranger, but it wasn't. Lucas

gained assistance from Jerry and the two of them dragged Harry through the snow, aiming for a small gap between the semi-circle of fire and the hooded figure. Harry had every confidence that Kath was not part of his attempted rescue, yet he could hear her crunching footfalls following beyond.

Trying to keep her safety in numbers.

“What are we doing?” Harry asked wearily as they dragged him along by the armpits. His legs trailed along behind him like boneless chickens and he felt dazed.

“Running for our lives,” said Lucas. “What in the blazes do you think?”

“The supermarket must be nearby,” said Jerry, struggling with Harry’s weight. “At least I hope so.”

“It is,” said Kath. “We’re here.”

Harry looked up to see the dim shape of a building present itself through the snow, only twenty yards away.

We’re going to make it...

Harry craned his neck to look back behind him, but his joints would not

allow sufficient movement to see anything clearly. “Where is that... thing?”

Lucas and Jerry continued to drag him, their speed increasing as the sight of the supermarket spurred them on. Kath overtook them all and started searching her pockets frantically, no doubt for the building’s keys.

Harry repeated himself. “I said, *where is it?*”

They reached the supermarket’s locked fire door and dumped Harry down. Lucas stared down at him and offered his hand. “I don’t bloody know

where it is. We lost it on our way here and I was in too much a hurry to keep looking back, so get up and get ready in case it comes back.”

Kath pulled her keys from her pocket and started sifting through them. “I can’t see a thing out here.”

Harry managed to stand, his legs solidifying from jelly to gradually-setting cement, not yet firm but getting there. He looked back in the direction they’d come from, and found his heart stopping in his chest. “You best hurry up and get us inside, Kath. I mean right NOW!”

Harry waited anxiously while the others turned and saw for themselves. Coming through the snow, with a steady and methodical purpose, was the hooded figure again; only this time, on either side of him, were others. Dozens, in fact. Their ghostly visages seemed to melt into the background of the thick, whirling blizzard that could have hidden an endless legion of them for all Harry knew.

Kath frantically tried keys on the lock. Lucas fell to his knees, muttering. Harry thought he heard the Irishman say something about 'an army of Christ', but there was no time to ask about it; the hooded figures were approaching.

Urgently, Harry turned to Kath at the door. “How’s it going?” he asked her.

The chinking of keys. Kath fumbled with the lock. “I’m trying,” she said, sounding close to tears. “I’m sodding trying.”

As if things could get any worse, Harry heard a sound that chilled his blood several degrees beyond the ice that already flowed through it.

Growling.

The sound was so guttural that it could have emanated from a pack of rabid wolves. *Or a dozen beasts from*

hell, thought Harry. Alongside the hooded figures appeared several other beast-like shapes, moving faster and more erratically than their two legged companions. They seemed like oversized dogs, just as Jerry had described them. Harry wished he'd paid more attention

“It’s the hounds of hell,” said Jerry. “The ones I saw earlier with Jess. Believe me now?”

Harry clutched the chef’s knife tightly in his hand, but had a horrible feeling that it would prove to be as useful as a handful of wet spaghetti. “Jerry,” he said. “If we live through this

then I will be the first in line to apologise for not believing you, but now's not the time for humble pie."

Jerry seemed buoyed by the vindication and actually began to smile. He moved over to Kath and picked up the baseball bat that she had propped against the supermarket's door.

Lucas was still on his knees, but had stopped his incoherent rambling. He fixed his gaze on Jerry. "What the b'jaysus are you doing, lad?"

Jerry narrowed his eyes at the man. "I'm getting even."

With that, Jerry trudged through the snow at a speed that was as close to running as was probably possible given the terrain. He held the baseball bat high above his head as if it were a holy sword of Justice. The strange army of unearthly figures continued approaching, led by the more quickly moving ‘hounds of hell’. Jerry didn’t seem concerned by any of them and picked up speed.

“Jerry, get back here!” Harry shouted, but his words were wasted and almost faded into the blizzard.

Moments before Jerry was set to collide with one of the hounds, he stopped in his tracks. Harry watched the

boy stick out an arm and make a beckoning motion with his hand. “Let’s go, Cujo!”

Jerry swung the baseball bat from over his head in a downwards arc. It connected with the skull of his closest attacker. With a snarling whine, the beast shot sideways into the snow, which quickly begun to melt around it. Jerry swung the bat again and it connected with the beast’s hindquarters, causing it to yowl in agony. Before he had time to swing again, it got to its feet and fled. Jerry held the bat above his head triumphantly. “Flawless victory, motherfucker.”

Harry watched the surreal image of the spotty, teenaged boy taking on a pack of hell beasts with a decrepit baseball bat and wondered whether he was stoned. Had his drinking progressed to drug-abuse and he was now just lying somewhere, hallucinating the whole thing? It was a thought he would've liked to have held on to very much, but he knew it wasn't true. They were all in very serious danger and none of this was imaginary. It wasn't a movie.

“Jerry! Get your arse back here, now!”

Harry's warning was too late. He and the others watched in horror as a

wave of dog-beasts swarmed over Jerry's scrawny frame. Harry was unable to take his eyes away as flesh and fat were shorn from teenager's bones like meat from a turkey, razor sharp fangs piercing every inch of Jerry's skin. Harry thought his ears would explode under the force of the boy's agonised screams and was grateful that they only lasted a few seconds as the exertion eventually ripped free Jerry's vocal cords.

Harry sobbed.

“Thank God!” Kath said finally, unlocking the door and pushing it open so hard that she fell to her knees on the

other side. Harry himself did not move, too transfixed by the pack of wretched beasts that feasted on Jerry's still-twitching body as though it were a packet of raw meat. Despite everything that had happened that night, Harry was only now realising the situation they were in. "They're going to kill us all, aren't they?"

"Maybe," said Lucas, pulling him backwards and through the door. "But there's no reason for us to make it easy for them, is there?"

Finding a defiance inside of himself that he did not know existed, Harry closed the supermarket's door behind

them. “No,” he said, “That’s the last thing we’re going to do.”

Kath locked the supermarket’s door while, outside, a dozen hooded demons surrounded them.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Damien...

“Damien, wake up.”

Damien opened his eyes, expecting light to stream in and burn his retinas; but there was only darkness. Gradually, he remembered the evening's events. The unending snow, the power cut, and everybody freezing. He could remember no more than that at first, but when he found himself tied to a chair he began to panic. It all came flooding back to him.

“Steph!”

“I’m here, Damien. I’m going to untie you, but you’ve got to stay calm. We need your help.”

“That son of a bitch knocked me out. Harry, I’m going to kill you.”

“Damien, I can only untie you if you calm down. The only reason Harry hit you was because he thought-“

“I was going rape you.”

“Yes,” said Steph. “We got it all wrong. It wasn’t you, it was-“

“Nigel!” Damien could remember; remembered finding the sick pervert about to stick it in an unconscious woman. Not just any women either; it was Steph. Damien was a lot of things, but a rapist he was not. Sex offenders and nonces were a whole other level of scumbag; subhuman slugs. He pulled at his wrist restraints, furious when they would not come off. “Where the *hell* is that *fucker*?”

“I’m here princess, and guess what? This time you get to watch.”

Damien strained in the darkness to see what was happening. He heard

Nigel speak and the girls cry out in fear, but his eyes were still too unadjusted to the lack of light. He could only make out vague, shifting shapes in front of the fireplace. He struggled at the ropes around his wrists. *Come on, come on. Need to put a stop to this before it gets nasty. Motherfucker needs to pay.*

The ropes were tight, too tight in fact, and the skin around Damien's wrists was abraded and sore. Nevertheless, he began sawing his arms back and forth, trying to create some slack that could set him free. In front of the fire the struggle continued, punctuated by a wet slapping sound.

Damien flinched as a body fell down in front of him. Steph lay crumpled on the floor, dazed and semi-conscious, blood seeping from a wound on the bridge of her nose. She murmured something to Damien but it went by him. It sounded like the word 'poker'. Damien continued rubbing his wrists back and forth and felt the ropes loosen a couple of millimetres.

Yes, come on.

At his feet, Damien could feel Steph squirming on the floor, slowly moving past his legs. At first he thought she was making a run for it, but a tugging sensation at his wrists made him realise

what she was doing: untying him.

He felt the ropes loosen.

Damien's eyes adjusted to the scene in front of him. Nigel had Jess up against the wall beside the fire, struggling back and forth as the girl held onto his wrists, keeping his hands away from her. Jess obviously put up more of a fight than Nigel expected. Damien almost smiled as he watched her spit and bite at his face, doing anything she could to defend herself.

Girl's a fighter!

Damien felt the ropes come free

from his wrists and, with a jolt that emanated from his knees and spread through his entire body, he shot up and leapt towards Nigel, landing hard against the man's broad back. It felt like hitting a barn wall, but the blow was enough to send Nigel face first into the wall. Unfortunately, Jess was in the way and got squashed in between. The air exploded from her lungs in a great '*whooof!*' as she fell to the floor like a puppet without strings. Taking advantage of the confusion, Damien swung his fist.

And missed.

Nigel turned and ducked the blow,

countering with a punch of his own. The man's large, meaty fist connected with Damien's ribcage with an echoing *thud!* The air flowed out of him like a whistle on a steam train; a drawn-out, strangled wheeze that seemed to go on forever. Damien fell to his knees and tried hard not to lose focus completely as the pain urged him to lie down and give up.

Nigel stomped towards him like a greasy-haired rhino, grunting and snorting. There was still too little air in Damien's winded lungs to launch an effective attack, and he was just about to resign himself to the oncoming onslaught when he spotted something.

Damien snatched at the poker that lay strewn at his feet. It seemed to glow in the soft light of the fire like a gift from the Gods. It was his salvation; his chance to knock the greasy haired rapist to hell and back. Damien rose up, sweeping the poker up and over his head.

The clanging sound that filled the room as the thick iron poker struck Nigel's skull was the most beautiful thing Damien had ever heard. It was music. *Head banging music.*

Nigel staggered backwards, half-conscious, legs wobbling like a beaten boxer's. Damien watched the whites of

Nigel's eyes roll back into his head.
Watched as his hulking body crumpled.
And watched as Nigel fell backwards
into the fire.

With an agonising scream, Nigel's eyes rolled back into their normal position as his mind was forced back to lucidity. His head lay in the fire like it was a pillow; a pillow that quickly roasted and blistered his skin. Like a greyhound out of the starting gates, Nigel shot forward, leaping away from the fire like it was trying to consume him whole. The flames had died down to embers; most likely the only reason Nigel wasn't a human fireball right now. The whole thing happened so

quickly that Damien couldn't think fast enough to react to Nigel's enflamed body hurtling towards him.

When the knife entered, it felt like a bee sting, followed by a huge amount of pressure. Damien thought it was ironic. *About time I found out what this feels like. I always thought it would have been sooner*

The pain was unbearable.

####

“What in the *blue hell* is happening tonight. I mean FUCK!” Harry felt like he was going to go insane, smash the place up like a coked-up rock star. He’d just watched a teenage boy get ripped to shreds like minced beef on a taco. This on a night where the world was being consumed by a never-ending torrent of snow and hooded demons stalked run-down English council estates for kicks. On top of everything, it all seemed to have something to do with *him*. They had called Harry ‘*the sinner*’.

“Seriously, can anybody tell me what is going on? I just watched Jerry get ripped apart by God-knows what,

and now we're trapped in a pitch-black supermarket surrounded by a bunch of homicidal monks."

"I don't think they're monks," said Kath.

"No shit," said Harry.

Lucas walked over to the front fire door and looked out into the snow. There seemed to be movement outside. He turned around and faced Harry. "I think it would be shrewd if we thought a wee bit less about what they be and a lot more about how to get passed them and back to the pub. The others need us."

Harry let air flow slowly from his lips, trying to calm his beating heart. It didn't work and left Harry feeling even more anxious. "We're fucked, you know that?"

Lucas nodded. "Aye, but better to take a shagging standing up than to bend over and take it."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "You've obviously spent some time in prison, right?"

Lucas grinned. "You could say that, Harry Boy, and you wouldn't be too far from the truth."

“Okay,” said Kath. “Can we just do what we’re here to do? It’s even colder here than it was outside.”

Harry nodded and started moving. “Okay. Let’s get the coal, painkillers, food. Anything we need to take back, let’s get it all piled up over here.”

Kath and Lucas nodded and got to work. Before Lucas ran off into the darkness he saluted Harry and said, “Right away, Major Jobson.”

It was then that Harry realised something important; something he’d overlooked earlier. He’d never told Lucas what his surname was and he was

sure no one else had either.

Which begged one question for Harry: *How does Lucas know me?*

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jess finally managed to take a breath. It succeeded only in making her nauseous. The sick feeling was due to watching helplessly as a badly-burned Nigel hacked his knife into Damien's mid-section. Jess was powerless to intervene as Nigel heaved a Steph's groggy body onto the chair that had earlier held Damien captive.

Jess scanned the floor for a weapon, looking for a solution. The only thing she could see was the trusty

fire poker, but it lay several feet away, next to a wounded Damien, who writhed on the floor and gritted his teeth against his pain.

Poor Guy!

Despite Damien's unscrupulous activities around the local estate, Jess genuinely hoped that he would pull through. As things turned out, he wasn't as bad as people made out. Wishful thinking aside, though, Jess still had to make it over to the poker without being spotted by the 18-stone rapist currently taping Steph to a chair. Even worse, she had to do it despite the cold sending her shivering body into awkward spasms.

So I have to be silent and stealthy while chattering like an over-excited monkey. Jerry would just love this. I'm sure they'd be a film reference that would fit perfectly.

God, how she would just love for Jerry and the others to come barging through the pub's doors right now to save her from this wretched nightmare. But if tonight had taught her anything, it was not to hope for the best because things had a habit of getting worse.

Without realising it, Jess had started to move, crawling carefully on her hands and knees, shivering every

time she took her arms away from her body. The chill was bad enough that even the fibres of the carpet had begun to freeze over; sharp and brittle, like tiny pine needles digging into her palms. Up ahead lay the poker, and perhaps her only chance to protect herself from Nigel. She looked up at the big man and saw that he was now trying to stir Steph from her fuzzy haze. “Rise and shine, sleepyhead,” he was saying. “I want you to be awake for this. No fun if you sleep through all the fun.”

Steph opened her eyes and managed to focus on him. She spat at Nigel. “Screw you!” As soon as it had arrived, the fight seemed to leave Steph again.

She was too bruised and broken to keep it up. Nigel slapped her hard, the sound filling the room and bouncing off the walls.

Jess closed her eyes and winced, but continued crawling forward, the poker just a few feet away now.

Nigel slapped Steph again, this time a backhand. “Spitting is very unladylike,” he shouted, “and anything ill-befitting of a lady will not be tolerated. If I wanted a bloke for entertainment then I would have tied Damien back up in the chair. Speaking of which, how are you big man?” Nigel turned to Damien who was still moaning

on the floor. “Not so hard now, huh?” Then he took a run up and booted the lad in the chest. The air exploded from him like a car backfiring. Jess winced again, glad she wasn’t on the receiving end.

She carried on shuffling towards the poker. It was nearly at arm’s length now.

Almost there.

Almost...

Jess cried out as a heavy work shoe crunched down on her hand. She knew right away that she’d blown it and that she would most likely pay for it with her life. Nigel twisted his heel and pushed

down harder, cracking and bruising the small bones in Jess' hand. She wailed in agony and struggled to get free. Nigel laughed sadistically, the sound more chilling than the cold night air. Jess's screams increased as she felt a rough hand tangle itself into her hair and yank. The pressure removed itself from her hand and she was hoisted to her feet, finding herself face to face with Nigel who was snarling like a feral beast. She tried to pull away.

“Not so fast, sweetheart. Now that Steph is nice and comfortable, you and me have some time on our hands.”

She fought to twist herself free, but

it was like being held in a vice. “The others will be back at any minute,” she warned him. “You’re going to get your arse kicked, you sicko.”

Nigel smiled. “By who? Harry, the alcoholic? Jerry, the loser? Or Lucas, the thick mick? I don’t think so, sweetheart. They’re probably already dead, and if not then I’ll see to them later.”

The thought of Nigel killing the other’s filled Jess with rage. She decided to take a leaf out of Steph’s book and spat. Nigel flinched as the saliva missile hit his cheek and she used this opportunity to try and get free,

driving her knee as hard as she could toward Nigel's groin. The blow missed the intended target but still managed to plant firmly in his mid-section. He staggered backwards, releasing her, as the air escaped from his lungs. Jess used the time to make a grab for the poker, diving to the floor and reaching out with her hand. Her fingers closed around the metal and Jess's heart skipped a beat as she realised she'd actually managed to get the weapon. Now she had to use it. She leapt to her feet and turned around, poker in hand, ready to let Nigel have it.

But he was gone.

Jess did a double take of the room. She knew that Nigel was hiding somewhere, waiting to pounce. *But from where?* With the poker held out in front of her, she took a tentative step forward, expecting an attack at any moment. Her nerves were tattered and frayed by the constant jolts of fear. If she lived through tonight, Jess decided she should write a book. *The Winter Rapist? The Ice Killer?* She'd have to think about it later.

Moving past the sofa, she prepared to swing with all her might, sure that Nigel would jump out at her any second. She moved carefully, watchfully, deciding that the most effective hiding

place for a serial killer would be behind the bar. There was only one entrance to the area behind it so, if she was quick enough, she could take Nigel out before he could manage to do anything to her. Jess slowed her pace, not relishing an encounter that was life or death.

The bar loomed closer, lit by a number of dwindling candles. The struggling light shone on the liqueur bottles that lined the shelves, making them look like rows of crocodile teeth. The final few steps were nerve-wracking and she had to come to a halt before she reached the bar fully. *Deep breaths, Jess. Nigel must be behind there, but you're going to be ready for*

him. Armed and ready. She squeezed the poker in her right hand, anxiety forcing her to check it was still there even though she knew it was. *Okay, here goes.*

Jess took the final steps towards the bar area and quickly sidestepped to see behind it. As she suspected, Nigel was crouched and waiting for her. What she hadn't expected was how quick the big man would be – and how much it would hurt having a vodka bottle smashed over her head.

Straight away, Jess felt the blood cascade from the top of her head. It ran into her eyes, blinding her, and then into

her mouth. She could hardly believe she was lucid enough to even taste the coppery, metallic taste of it, and that somehow the blow had not knocked her out. It had certainly dazed her.

She teetered backwards, legs folding as she hit the floor. Her ears picked up the heavy *clunk* of the poker skittering across the floor. *How many times is that thing going to get dropped?* Despite everything, Jess found herself laughing at the thought. No need to lose her sense of humour now, not when she needed it more than ever. She collapsed onto her back, too dizzy to get back up. Not that it would have mattered because Nigel was on her like

a shot, pinning her arms down with his knees and straddling her chest. Held to her throat was the broken remnants of the Vodka bottle.

Nigel sneered at her. “Time to die, bitch.”

Jess sneered right back, blood covering her teeth. “See you in hell, you small prick mummy’s boy!”

The comment seemed to hurt Nigel and Jess started to laugh again. Right now, the over-sized, sexual predator looked like an insecure little boy. She would take that satisfying image to her grave happily. Even as the jagged bottle

descended towards her throat, Jess continued to cackle out loud, closing her eyes and waiting for it all to be over.

Jess had expected a sharp, ragged pain, but instead was jolted by a heavy force hitting her instead. She opened her eyes tentatively and at first could not understand what had happened. Then she realised that Nigel had collapsed forward, her face now buried in his stomach. *What the hell?* She punched and prodded at Nigel's lumpy body, trying to move it, but when it didn't budge, it became obvious that he was unconscious.

What the hell happened?

After several attempts at rolling the dead weight aside, Jess finally managed to slump Nigel over to one side and slide out from under him. She still didn't understand what happened. At least not until she saw...

“Peter! You're okay?”

Her friend was standing over her, gripping the poker that now dripped goblets of blood from its tip onto the floor. He smiled at her, although his ruined face made the expression look ghoulish and grim. He released the poker and dropped to his knees, letting out a long breath. He managed to speak.

“Are you...okay...Jess?”

“Yes, yes. I’m fine, Peter. Thanks to you, that is.”

Peter nodded and his smile widened. Then he lost consciousness, pitching forward and hitting the floor face down. Jess felt like doing the same.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When Harry found a pile of children's sledges he thought that things were looking up, but only slightly. Sure it would make getting the coal and other supplies back to the pub easier, but it didn't change the fact the supermarket was surrounded by god-knows-what. To make matters even worse, Harry had just realised that Lucas was not who he said he was. Before Harry said anything, however, he'd decided to complete the task they'd come here for. Between the three of them, him, Lucas, and Kath had

managed to pile up more than enough coal to keep the pub going till morning and beyond, along with a bag full of over-the-counter painkillers. They'd even found a couple of torches and two dozen packets of batteries. Now that they were done and ready to go, Harry was ready to confront Lucas about the secrets he was keeping.

“Hey, Lucas? How do you know my surname?”

Lucas turned to Harry, confusion on his face. “What’s that now?”

“I said how do you know my surname? I didn’t tell you.”

Kath huffed. “Do we really have time for this, Harry? We need to get going.”

Lucas shrugged. “I didn’t realise it was such a secret, fella.”

“It’s not,” Harry admitted, “but I never told it to you.”

“The demon monks outside said it, didn’t they? They said, HARRY JOBSON YOU ARE THE SINNER. Or something like that.”

Harry thought for a moment. “No, Lucas, you knew before that. You called

me Major Jobson earlier at The Trumpet.”

Kath looked pissed off, but at the same time seemed a little interested also. It appeared she wanted to see what Lucas’s answer would be.

But he gave none.

Harry took a quick breath, trying to stay calm. “Lucas, I asked you a question.”

The Irishman scratched at his head before letting his arms loose to swing by his sides. “Do you really want to do this now, Harry Boy?”

Harry's stomach churned as he wondered whether he really *did* want to do this now. He really had no idea who Lucas was, what he was planning, or what he was capable of. Harry swallowed. "Yeah, I want to do this right now. Who the hell are you and how do you know me?"

Lucas walked over to the cash register and hopped up onto its surface, then took a long, deep breath. "Who I am is something we really don't have time for right now, but how I know you is a little easier."

"Well, get started then," Harry

demanded.

Lucas nodded. “I know you, because you’re the sinner. Same reason them outside know you – who, might I add, have nothing to do with me.”

“You expect me to believe that? You must have something to do with them.”

“I really don’t. You have my word, for what it’s worth. What happened tonight was going to happen whether I turned up or not.”

Kath stepped towards Lucas. “Who *are* you? What’s going on?”

Lucas looked tired of the questions already, but he still gave answers. “Both questions we don’t have time for. All I can say is that the fellas outside came for Harry. Does the ‘what’ or the ‘why’ really matter?”

“It fucking does to me,” said Harry. It felt like his stomach was going to burst open and release his organs onto the floor. The scar on the back of his hand throbbed; it always did when he was losing control, as though it were trying to remind him what could happen when he let his anger run away with him.

“Why me?” Harry asked, trying to keep his focus on what mattered.

“B’Jaysus, we’re going around in circles. Because you’re the sinner.”

Kath shook her head. “Why is Harry ‘the sinner’?”

Harry would tell her why. It was time to own up. “Because I murdered a man.”

Lucas acted as though he knew this all along, but Kath recoiled in horror, stepping away from Harry and towards the door.

“Calm down, woman,” said Lucas. “He’s not intending to kill *you*.” He looked at Harry. “Are you?”

“No, of course not! The man I killed destroyed my life. It was revenge. So why is this all because of me? There’re far worse people in the world,”

“I agree,” said Lucas. “In the grand scale of things, you’re pretty low down on the Sin scale, but murder is murder.”

“But why did *my* sin cause all this? If that’s what you’re suggesting?” Harry felt dizzy. This morning he’d woken up expecting the day to end in a drunken

stupor just like the 365 days before it. He never expected it to end like this.

Lucas stared at Harry intensely. The man's blue eyes seemed to light the darkness around him. "Because *yours* was the last. The sin that finally tipped the scales."

Harry was about to demand what the hell that meant, but, before he could grab Lucas around the throat and force him to speak sense, the doors blew inwards. Not a gust of wind swinging them open, but an actual concussive force that ripped them from their hinges and flung them across the room. The wind and snow flew in through the gap

like the breath from a dragon.

Harry ran to Lucas and grabbed the man by the arm. “What the hell is happening?”

Lucas had to shout to be heard above the howling wind. “They’re coming to get you.”

Harry shook his head. “But inside the pub we were safe, they left us alone. Why are they coming inside now?”

“They couldn’t enter the pub, but they can enter here. That’s all I can tell you, right now, but I can help you get out.”

“I’m listening.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Go and get all of the porno magazines.”

“What?” Kath joined them over at the cash desk. The wind had blown her dark hair into a freakish mess of tangles. She looked like a homeless witch. “This is no time for self-gratification.

“Just go and get me all the smutty magazines,” Lucas reiterated. “You’ll see why.”

Harry lacked the energy to ask

more questions. The monsters outside would be inside any minute, led by the insidious dog beasts that had shredded poor, stupid Jerry to pieces. He turned, ran, and then sprinted over to the magazine aisle. It was closest to where the fire doors had been and the nearest racks were shedding their contents under the harsh wind attacking them. Harry almost slipped on a Gardening Annual as he made his way over to the far end, where the shining images of bikini clad women lay three deep. Why on earth Lucas wanted all the lad mags, he could not fathom, but it seemed as though the man knew what was going on a lot better than anyone else. Harry saw little choice but to do what Lucas asked.

He picked up a copy of *Nipples* and then quickly gathered up several more publications of ill-repute. He clutched the pile to his chest and turned back in the opposite direction, making sure not to slip on the Gardening Annual as he ran back to Lucas. When Harry got there, the Irishman was accepting what looked like cello tape from Kath, who'd obviously been sent on her own errand.

Harry stood in front of Lucas and waited. "Well?"

"Set the pornos down on the counter, fella, and pass me that broom behind the counter."

Harry played along, leaning over the service desk to grab the wooden handle. “Okay, got it. Now what?”

Lucas took the broom and placed it on the counter with the magazines. Then he began to tear out the pages featuring naked women (as well as a few men).

“What are you doing?” Kath asked him. “We need to hurry. I can hear them growling out there.”

Lucas ignored her and carried on tearing the pages. Once a modest pile of immodest pictures had accrued, he grabbed the cello tape. What he did next

was the most bizarre. Lucas began to wrap the broom head up in the naked pictures, fastening them with the tape. He wrapped the handle too in the same way.

Harry couldn't take it anymore, the growling from outside was too close. "Okay, Lucas. I'm all for arts and crafts, but what is this helping?"

Lucas shoved the porno broom into Harry arms. "You'll see. Right, that sorts out the choir; now something for the hounds."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "The choir?"

Lucas ignored him and disappeared

into one of the aisles. When he came back he was holding something in each hand.

“Salt?” said Kath.

“Aye,” said Lucas. “It’ll deal with the growly fellas, trust me.” He handed one of the tubs of salt to Kath and kept one for himself. Apparently, the broom was going to be Harry’s weapon.

“Fine,” Harry sighed. “Let’s just get out of here before those things get in here.”

“Too late.” Lucas pointed over to the doorway at one of the ‘hounds’. It

sat watching them all, ears pricked up like an over-sized spaniel.

Except spaniels don't have so many teeth.

When the beast saw that it had caught their attention, it began to snarl; a low, buzzing sound that increased to a full-blown rumbling.

“What should I do?” asked Kath, holding the salt tub out in front of her with a shaking hand.

“Watch and learn,” said Lucas, who walked forward slowly, almost casually, towards the beast. As he got

nearer, the creature bunched up, muscles tensing as it prepared to attack. Lucas was unconcerned and met the hound head on.

Harry swallowed in anticipation.
Insane. The man's insane.

Lucas looked back at them and nodded, as if to say 'watch this', then flicked the salt container back and forth, spilling out a long stream of granules through the air. Instantly, the beast began to howl, its whimpers no different to a beaten puppy, weak and subservient. Harry soon smelt burning and realised it was the animal's flesh. Like sausages grilling on a barbeque, but

with a hint of something else.

Eggs? No, something else. I remember it from school...

The smell was sulphur.

The hound bolted; turning and running back through the doorway and into the night, leaving behind a cloying puddle of dissolving flesh that made Harry want to retch.

“Now we can go,” said Lucas.

“What about the ‘choir’?” Harry asked.

“That’s what the broom’s for. Make sure you use it when the time is right.”

“And how do I know when that is?”

“It’ll be when something starts trying to kill you.”

Right, thought Harry. I’ll just use my broom kung fu on them. Fuck sake, when we get back to the pub Lucas better have some goddamn answers.

Unless he stabs me in the back before we even get there.

“Okay,” said Harry, looking out

into the freezing dark night. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jess held Peter in her arms, amazed that he was actually awake. Nearby, Steph was looking after Damien, who was doing okay despite having been stabbed. As things turned out, the blade had lodged between his ribs and hadn't gone in more than an inch or so. Damien said it hurt like hell but he'd be okay, despite the heavy bleeding. She'd wanted to have a look at the wound but Damien was too macho to allow it.

When Jess untied Steph, she'd had

to wake her up and coax her from unconsciousness. Once she'd snapped back to reality, though, Steph was visibly horrified by what Nigel had done. She'd started weeping. Damien had then sent her away to tend to her wounds. Jess had a feeling that he'd only suggested it to give her something to concentrate on other than the attack.

Nigel was out cold in the middle of the floor. They would have to tie him up soon, but, for now, everyone would have one eye on him, ready to beat him down if he dared make the slightest move. Damien stood over him now, poker in hand.

After saving her, and losing consciousness, Peter had slowly stirred back awake, semi-lucid again. Lay across Jess's lap, his body-warmth pulsed through her clothing. He was burning up badly and she worried about his temperature being so high. She looked down at him now with more concern than she'd ever felt for a person.

“Did the nasty man...hurt you... Jessica?”

“No, Peter. You saved me. You're my hero.”

Peter smiled a grim, broken-toothed smile. “I am...sorry I let you go out

alone. I...looked for you.”

Jess smiled down at him. “I know you did. It wasn’t your fault. No one could know what was going to happen tonight. I think it’s the end of the world or something.”

Peter closed his eyes for a few seconds and Jess worried that he would not open them again. The boy’s breathing was uneven and shallow. She shook him gently. “Peter, are you okay?”

He opened his eyes again. “I am... fine. The world is not ending, Jessica.”

“No?”

“No. As long as there are still beautiful things, we will be...okay.” He was looking at Jess and she realised that he meant her. “Can I...ask you...something?”

“Yes,” said Jess. “Of course you can. What is it?”

“Can I...kiss you?”

Jess was taken aback. After all Peter had been through tonight, the only thing he wanted was a kiss. *And from me?* Did he have feelings for her before all of this? Or was he just delirious? Of

all the times Jess had thought about kissing Peter, the whole time he had perhaps been thinking the same. It hurt her soul to a point where she felt like she couldn't go on, that she was ready to just lie down and wait for death. First though, she had a question from a dear friend to answer.

“Yes, Peter,” she said, “you can kiss me. Peter...”

Jess looked down at her friend and realised that he was dead. The only thing stopping Jess from screaming was how peaceful he looked. She was glad that his pain was finally over and smiled down at him one last, final time. “Yes,

Peter, you can kiss me.” She leant down and placed her lips against the soft, delicate mouth of her friend, sad and angry that he would never get to be anything more. “Goodbye,” she said, finally, placing him down on the floor. Jess was surprised to find an empty, hollow place inside of herself. Part of her had just died.

Jess stood up and Damien noticed her. He asked if she was alright.

Then Steph came back from wherever she'd been and immediately noticed Peter lying dead on the floor. She looked at Jess and shook her head solemnly. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Jess nodded, feeling numb. “It’s okay. At least I got to say goodbye...in a way.”

Steph nodded. “Can we do anything?”

Jess was about to answer when movement from the corner of her eye startled her. “Shit, Nigel’s up.”

The three of them grouped together as Nigel staggered about like a wounded animal, his skin blackened and weeping pus. Jess waited for him to run at them, wailing and screeching like a demon, but thankfully he hurried away instead,

bumping into tables in an effort to escape.

“He’s trying to do one,” said Damien.

“Let him,” said Jess. “He can go and freeze out there.”

Nigel bumped into more furniture and fled towards the door. Jess wasn’t sure if he’d fully regained his senses from the blow to his head yet. He certainly seemed disorientated and unsettled, but somehow he managed to find his way to the door, flinging it open and staggering outside. Then he was gone, disappearing into the night. Jess

prayed never to see him again.

“Good riddance!” she said.

Steph put an arm around Jess. “Come on, sweetheart. We should get ourselves downstairs in front of the barrel fire now that we don’t have to worry about him. The fire in here’s about to go out anyway and that broken window is going to freeze us to stone.”

Jess agreed. “Plus, Old Graham will be wondering what’s going on.”

Steph’s eyes suddenly widened. “Shite, I forgot all about Old Graham. Hopefully he’s drunk enough to not have

heard any of this.”

“We best get down there,” Jess said, turning with Steph, towards the bar. She took two steps and then stopped. “Shit! Are you okay?” Damien was doubled up against the bar, taking in long, laboured breaths. “You’re still bleeding?”

He waved a hand dismissively and Jess saw that it was soaked with blood. “Just a flesh wound,” he said and then laughed. “I always wanted to say that.”

“It’s not a joke, Damien. Are you okay?”

“I’ll live. Just a bit sore. The blood is probably to be expected after getting stabbed and everything. Like I told you though, it isn’t deep.”

Steph didn’t seem convinced. Jess wasn’t either, but what could they do? Jess was thinking that maybe the wound was worse than he was letting on, but having never seen a stab wound before there was a chance she was just overreacting. If Damien said he was fine then all they could do was believe him. “Let’s go downstairs,” she said finally.

The three of them gathered candles from the bar and entered the rear

corridor. The air seemed no warmer inside, which was strange as earlier it had been filled with a warm air current flowing up from the stairs. Now it felt as cold as the rest of the pub. Steph took the staircase first; Jess and Damien followed. When they reached the bottom together, darkness greeted them and Jess realised the fire had gone out.

“Oh no,” said Steph, lighting the room with her candle. The image of Old Graham shone into view, still lying on the floor where they’d left him. Even in the poor light, Jess could see the waxy blue tinge that travelled the lines of the old man’s face and, particularly, his lips. Old Graham was dead.

Steph leapt down onto her knees, dropping her candle on the cement floor where it quickly extinguished. In the darkness, Jess and Damien had no choice but to listen to her scream.

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Outside it was as Harry had feared. They were surrounded. In all directions, the tall, hooded figures loomed over them, standing motionless, shoulder to shoulder, forming a wall of

towering bodies. In front of them the hounds sat obediently.

“What do we do?” asked Harry.

Lucas shoved him forward. “Just swing for the first bugger that comes for you. Kath and I will handle the hounds.”

Harry willed his legs to take him forward and after several false starts got himself moving. The monsters remained in place but watched him with great interest. Harry felt like a lowly ant beneath their stares. A low growl emanated from the hounds but they made no attempts to attack, heeled to their hooded masters and waiting for

commands.

Harry got closer and wondered what to do. Did Lucas really expect to take on this army with just a broom and some salt shakers? They were going to die; any other outcome seemed impossible. Still, Harry wasn't going down without a fight. If they wanted him, they would have to take him down, biting and screaming.

Once he was within a dozen metres of the hooded figures, the hounds at their feet became agitated, hackles rising as they paced back and forth.

“Ready with the salt?” asked

Harry.

“Bring it on,” said Lucas, taking hold of Kath and bringing her forward. Together, the two of them hurled salt into the air. It caught on the wind and dispersed in a thousand directions, disappearing into the blizzard.

Harry watched and waited as nothing happened. Then hounds began to squeal, their skin smoking and burning, dripping into the snow and turning it a dark, mottled brown. The beasts began to edge away, colliding with their masters who were still unmoving. After a few moments, the hounds managed to weave between the hooded figures and

flee into the night.

Satisfied, Harry looked at Lucas, who nodded at the broom he was holding. *Really?* Should he really be so willing to trust his survival on a domestic implement? Harry decided it was time to find out. The three of them lined up and marched forward, meeting their attackers head on.

Harry raised the broom like a pike, images of naked women fluttering in the wind. The hooded men remained motionless, their seven-foot frames like stone statues. When one of them finally moved, Harry thought he was going to soil himself.

The tallest figure, at the centre of the wall, stepped forward and flung out a hand. Harry curiously noticed that the creature's outstretched arm was human, yet twisted and talon-like. It pointed at Lucas as its owner hissed the word, '*WORMWOOD*'.

Harry turned to Lucas who was grinning ear to ear, not out of good nature, but seemingly out of defiance. Lucas winked at the figure addressing him. "How you doing there, Mickey? Been keeping well?"

"You know this...this thing?" asked Kath, the disgust in her voice not even

slightly hidden.

“Aye, but now is not the time.”

“It never is with you,” said Harry.

“Harry,” Lucas whispered over his shoulder, “now would be a good time to sweep up the trash.”

Harry didn't understand at first, until, finally, a light bulb went off in his head. He rammed the broom forwards, aiming for the hooded man's head. The blow missed by a mile and that seemed impossible. The intended victim had gone from motionless stone to dodging the blow in an unearthly blur of speed; a

glowing wisp of light that didn't actually seem to move so much as simply disappear and reappear somewhere else.

Harry cursed out loud. "Damn it! I missed."

"No, you didn't," said Lucas. "Get your bloody arse moving."

Harry realised that his attacker's evasion had left a gap in the wall of hooded bodies. The three of them ran, stumbling through the deep snow and almost having to claw themselves along. Despite their early lack of movement, the hooded men were now giving chase,

screeching and wailing as they did. As one got close, Harry swung out with the broom. It blinked out of existence and reappeared out of harm's way just as his brethren had before. Harry didn't mind if the swings were making contact or not, they were warding off the danger regardless.

As he clambered through the snow, Harry came side by side with Lucas. He turned and looked at him. "What the hell are they, Lucas?"

Lucas looked back and smiled. "Angels." He said it casually, as if the explanation was not completely insane.

Harry almost fell, just about managing to right himself with his next steps. “Angels?”

“Like I said, Harry Boy. Now’s not the time.”

The three of them continued making their way forward, not really knowing where they were heading other than away from danger. As Harry looked back, he saw that they were no longer being pursued. The ‘Angels’ were apparently in no rush to get their ‘sinner’. But, despite the lack of pursuit coming from behind, Harry could clearly make out something ahead of him.”

“Something’s up ahead,” said Kath.

Harry nodded. “I know, I can see. Ready with the salt?”

“Yes. Ready with broom?”

The three of them slowed down (not that they were making particularly great speed anyway). The shape in the distance began to come clearer into view. It was a person, heading towards them quickly.

Kath stated the obvious. “They’re coming right at us.”

Harry focused as much as he was

able to in the blustering snow. “It’s...”

“Nigel!” Kath shouted the word gleefully. “Are we glad to see you!”

Nigel came up to them, huffing and puffing. Harry noticed that the man had dried blood on his clothes as well as terrible burns on the left side of his face. He looked like something out of a horror film.

“Are you...okay?” Harry asked him.

Nigel looked feral, like an injured fox. When he answered, his words were slurred. “I’m fwine. Jush hash an asscident.”

Lucas stepped forward placed a hand on the Nigel's shoulder. "You don't look fine, fella. In fact you sound worse than a chorus of drunks. And that head wound don't look none too pretty. We should get you back to the pub."

Nigel seemed dismayed by the suggestion and lashed out. "Get sh'fuck offsh me."

Harry didn't like the way Nigel was acting. "What happened to you? Is Steph okay?"

Nigel's face scrunched up in a snarl at the mention of her name. Harry tried

to understand why. Then he saw the bloody knife in the man's hand and wondered why he hadn't spotted it sooner. Harry's eyes widened. "Did you hurt her?" Harry went to approach Nigel, but the man raised the knife at him.

Lucas put his hands out in front of him placatingly. "Whoa, whoa, there, fella. We just want to know the lass is safe."

Nigel spat blood into the snow and began backing away as he spoke. "You tell that bitch, I'll be back to finish what I started. I'll slice her fucking fingers off and keep them in my truck with the

other pathetic sluts I've killed."

Harry's entire body contorted with rage as he realised what the man's words meant. He began to wonder whether that knife in Nigel's hand had been used on Steph, and if Damien had been innocent all along. Harry found both questions too hard to think about. "I'm going to kill you."

Nigel continued backing away, holding the knife out in front of him in defence. Harry went to get after him, but Lucas stopped him. "No need, Harry Boy. Look!"

Harry looked past Nigel and saw

the shapes behind him. Gathering in the distance was a group of hounds. Nigel was walking directly at them. Harry relaxed and waited for the inevitable to happen.

It took about three minutes for Nigel to realise he'd been surrounded. The things attacked him as one, enveloping him as they had done Jerry. Harry watched with grim satisfaction as Nigel swiped impotently with his flick knife, managing to take a chunk or two of flesh from one hound, but failing to keep away the other dozen. Although it was hard to see past the writhing bodies of fur, Harry could clearly make out Nigel's intestines being fought over in a

macabre tug of war. But once the grim satisfaction begun to wane, the scene merely made Harry feel sick. He turned away and continued on into the snow, back towards The Trumpet.

Back towards Steph.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Despite the three of them being huddled together, Jess felt no warmer. Damien managed to get the fire going again by setting fire to some of the surplus duvets. They wouldn't burn for long, but they were better than nothing. Now the three of them lay shivering beneath a dozen sheets and blankets, trying to hold on to as much warmth as possible.

“Poor Old Graham,” said Steph, still upset but past the worse of it. She'd

wailed for almost twenty minutes when she first discovered the old man had expired. Jess knew that Steph felt responsible for it, but the truth of it was that it was all because of Nigel.

Pervert. Hope he's frozen to death out there or being eaten alive by one of those monsters.

Jess thought about the things she'd seen outside with Jerry and found it hard to imagine them clearly. With the hours that had passed it all seemed like some absurd hallucination. Monsters under the bed did not exist, she'd told herself, but she could not deny the death and bloodshed that she had occurred tonight.

Ben. Peter. Old Graham. They were all good guys. She prayed that the others would make it back safely. She'd do anything, right now, to sit and listen to Jerry's inane pop culture references.

“How long did you know Old Graham?” she asked Steph.

Steph let out a huff that was almost a laugh. “Whole time I worked here. Eighteen months, I guess. He could bore you to death something awful, but he didn't have a bad bone in his body.

Complained a lot; but never about anyone, or anything, in particular. I think he was a lonely old man that just wanted to be around people.”

“Least he lived a long life,” Damien chimed in, his voice jittery from the chill that affected everyone’s lungs.

“He didn’t deserve to go like this though. He survived a war and this is how he dies? It’s such a waste.”

Jess squeezed Steph’s hand under the blankets. “I think he went the way he would have liked. Drunk as a skunk and the centre of attention.”

Steph and Damien laughed.

“So, Damien,” Jess moved on, “are you really as much of a hard-knock as

you like to make people think?”

Damien was silent for a moment, but eventually answered. “Who says I want people to think that?”

“Guess it’s just the impression you give off. It confuses me though because, after tonight, I’m starting to think it’s all bullshit.”

Jess didn’t know why she felt the need to goad Damien, but she wanted a serious conversation to keep her mind occupied. Plus, she was intrigued about the kind of person Damien *actually* was.

Damien cleared his throat. “You

reckon?”

“Yeah,” said Jess. “I actually think you’re a nice guy. You just don’t want people to know it.”

“I agree,” said Steph.

Damien was silent again for a moment. Jess could feel him rustling beneath the sheets. When he finally spoke up, he sounded tired. “Maybe the only reason I’m not a nice guy is because people think bad of me no matter what I do.”

“But you make people think like that. You chose to make people think

you're a thug.”

Damien laughed. “You think I made people see me this way? I had no chance of ever being anything *other* than a thug.”

Jess sighed. “Is this the part where you say your daddy never hugged you enough?”

“No,” said Damien. “This is the part when I tell you my dad had me selling drugs for him at eight years old. No one would ever expect a kid, huh? Or how about how my dad put a lad in a coma a couple years ago and made me take credit for it around the local estate.

‘It will make people fear you’, he said. You’re absolutely right; my dad never hugged me because that’s not what monsters like him do.”

“Are you shitting me?” Steph asked. She sounded mortified.

“No, Steph. I’m not shitting you. Truth is I was glad the day he went to Jail. Thought it would set me free from his fucked-up demands, but I was just wishing on a fucking star. He called me at least once a day, making sure I was running his little empire for him ‘til he got back. Selling the merchandise and bringing in the dough.”

“You can’t blame everything on your dad,” Jess told him. “I saw you cause enough trouble to see that you enjoyed being the big man.”

“Yeah, course I did. The only love and respect I got was from the guys I hung with. If people on the estate don’t fear me then I’m nothing. I’m alone with nothing.”

“Why didn’t you get out?” asked Steph. “You could have done something, I’m sure.”

Damien was quiet once more but the sound of his breathing was heavy and distinct, laboured. “I was getting out

tonight. I had a bunch of money stashed and I was going to stay with an old girlfriend that moved to Edinburgh a couple years back. I just had one last thing to do tonight and then I was out of here.”

“One last thing?” asked Steph.

“Warn someone.”

“Who?”

“The guy who gave evidence on my old man and sent him down. Took over a year but my dad’s mates finally managed to find out who it was. My orders were to kill the guy tonight; take

him outside and stick a knife in him. Guess my dad was beginning to doubt my loyalty.”

“Jesus,” said Jess, not believing her ears. “You weren’t going to do it though, were you?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.” Damien raised his voice and it seemed to cause him pain. “I was...going to warn him, tell him to get the hell out of...town. Soon as the snow stopped I was going to get on a train and never come back. Maybe go to college and do business or something.”

No one spoke for a while. It was a

revelation, for sure, and not one Jess had expected. She felt sad that Damien might not get the chance to fulfil his plans for atonement; such things were important. Jess closed her eyes, feeling more tired than she'd ever felt in her life. The cold was no longer bothering her as much; in fact she was starting to feel quite numb. Maybe now she could finally rest for a while.

So tired...

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Harry's legs ached and he wasn't sure how much further they would take him. He didn't know whether the pub was two yards away or two thousand. All he could see was snow, and although he could see nothing following, angry growls and wailing from unseen beasts filled the air all around him.

Harry could no longer feel his feet from the cold and it felt as though he was walking around on nerveless stumps. Kath was obviously suffering too. She hadn't spoken since they'd watched Nigel die. Lucas however seemed fine, unaffected by the cold for reasons that Harry was eager to find out. Was the

man any more human than the hooded figures?

“So,” said Harry. “If the things wearing hoods are Angels, what are the dog things?”

Lucas continued looking forward as he walked, but answered the question promptly. “Hounds of Hell.”

Harry scratched his chin. “But don’t Angels come from Heaven.”

“Aye, they do, Harry Boy, but Angels have dominion over both heaven and hell during certain circumstances.”

Harry felt himself confused already. “Circumstances such as what?”

“You know, family reunions, birthdays, The Apocalypse.”

Harry spluttered. “The Apocalypse?”

“Aye, you know, Armageddon and all that, but it’s not as dramatic as you might think. There’re no horsemen, none of that fire and brimstone nonsense. The old man upstairs likes to do things a bit more efficiently. Biblical floods and such are more His style.”

“Or biblical snow storms,” Kath

added glumly.

Lucas smiled. “Indeed, lass.”

Harry was trying to follow, but things still didn’t add up in his mind. If this really was the end of the world, and God intended to simply freeze the world to death, then why did he need...?

“The Angels,” said Harry. “Why are they here?”

“Call them overseers if you will. God can’t just make the snow fall unendingly without having a presence on earth. He needs vessels to channel his power through - conduits. That’s why

the Angels have come down here, to exercise His will.”

Harry nodded, an idea forming in his head. “So if we take out the angels, we can stop this?”

Lucas laughed, loud and hearty. “Do you know how many of them there are? We’re talking tens of thousands, and they don’t play nice. You can’t kill an Angel anyway.”

Harry sagged. “I still don’t understand why they are doing this. It can’t be because of me?”

“I already told you Harry Boy, it’s

n o t *just* because of you, strictly speaking. It's because of *everyone*, really. God gave Noah a second chance, but that's all the big man had in his pocket of goodwill. He vowed that if the human race threw it in His face one more time then they wouldn't get another reprieve. But that's what you all went and did anyway, with your sinful ways and what not. Fucking, murdering, raping, stealing, cheating, Facebook. You name it; you people have over indulged in it. Over time, you all tipped the scales way past the point of no return."

"But not everyone is like that. Why can he not just punish the bad?"

Kath sighed. “Because there were probably too few to make it worthwhile.”

Lucas nodded. “Aye, there are a few decent souls, admittedly, and He took that into consideration. He allowed man to pass judgement on man.”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

“I *mean*, that he decided to judge mankind by its own values. Harry, after your wife and son were mowed down you made the choice for everyone.”

Harry spat. “I had no choice. The

guy had lost his license a year before, but got behind the wheel anyway. He was a lousy, fucking drunk and had probably mowed down a dozen children before he killed my son. He was an alcoholic. No good to anyone.”

“Sounds like you, Harry,” said Kath, spitefully.

It made Harry angry, but what was the use in arguing? “Maybe it is,” he conceded. “What would you have done after losing your family?”

“That’s the point,” said Lucas. “You had a choice. Did you get on with your life and make the memory of your

family proud or did you give in to vice, rejecting the gifts God gave you? Did you know that the reason Thomas was a drunk was because he too lost a son in a tragic accident? Just like you, Harry. Ironic, no? Have you really behaved any differently than him?”

“No,” said Harry, understanding the hypocrisy. “But I never drove drunk. I never let my problems endanger anybody else.”

“No, you just got hammered one night and murdered the chap who accidentally killed your family. Understandable, I guess, but definitely not the right path. God decided to judge

humanity by your actions and your choice was vengeance. Now vengeance has been reaped upon you all. You committed man's final sin – the last one that counted anyway - and you picked a gem: *Though shall not kill.*”

Harry thought about the night he'd murdered Thomas Morris; the night he crept into the hospital ward where the man had been admitted for a simple hernia operation. Getting past the lone prison guard was easy. It wasn't as if they were going to place a highly-paid special detachment outside the door. It was just one guard who didn't want to be stuck at a hospital at 3:00AM on a Friday night. Harry easily snuck past

him and entered Thomas's room. The man was in a deep sleep. Even after Harry shoved the plastic bag over his head.

It took several moments for Thomas to wake up and realise what was happening. The last thing he would have seen, through the clear plastic smothering his face, was Harry's dark, grinning expression as he suffocated the life out of him.

When it was all over, Harry had vomited in the en-suite toilet, before hurrying out of the room and snagging the back of his hand on the sharp edge of an unused gurney in the corridor. The

blood had gone everywhere and a nurse in a nearby ward had sat him down and stitched the wound, remarking on how much it resembled the shape of a star. Harry had been silent the entire time the nurse looked after him, staring into space like a zombie until she was done.

Somehow he had walked out of the hospital that night without incident. He'd just killed a man and no one noticed a thing.

Harry had then gone home immediately and drank for seven days straight. Later he sold his successful furniture business, as well as his house and car. The sales left him with just over half-a-million-pounds to drink

himself to death with. He had hoped it wouldn't take long. A year later, here he was, responsible for the death of mankind.

“Bullshit!” he said finally.

Lucas put his hands up. “Hey, I don't disagree. I don't want the world to end any more than you do – I'd miss Manchester United playing, for one – but it is what it is.”

“And there's nothing we can do?”
Kath pleaded.

Lucas shook his head. “Unless you can convince the big man to change his

mind – but I don't think he's listening. You can hold the choir off temporarily with objects of depravity like the porno mags. Same reason they can't enter the pub: it's a den of inequity and they can't step their holy toes in it."

"How do you know so much?" Harry demanded. The snow was sapping his strength and he needed answers before he was too tired to ask for them anymore. "How do you know so much about Angels?"

"Because I used to be one, laddie. Long time ago."

Harry understood. It came to him

in a flash of inspiration. “They called you wormwood.”

“That they did, but I prefer you to use my rightful name; the name given to me by my lord.”

“And what’s that?” Kath asked, obviously not yet understanding what Harry did.

Lucas turned to the woman and grinned, pointy teeth shining. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Lucifer, the Prince of Hell. Pleased to meet you.”

Harry frowned. He should have

been shouting ‘bullshit’, but somehow he knew it was true. Somehow the reality of the situation just could not be denied. He was trudging through the snow with the Devil, pursued by murderous angels. There was just one more thing that didn’t make sense. “Why the whole Irish jig then, Lucas Fergus?”

“Would you prefer I had horns and a red suit? Let’s just say that Ireland is close to my heart. Good, fun-loving, people that love a good time. Although I can take many forms, and appear however I wish, Irish is my favourite. Plus the chicks dig the accent.”

Harry laughed. *What a head fuck.*

“Why are you here? Are you helping the Angels?”

Lucas shook his head vehemently, snow falling from his hair. “Those righteous do-gooders? Hell no. They may be my brothers, but we parted ways a long time ago for good reason. Any of the choir that were any fun joined me in Hell. It’s *the* place to be, as long as you haven’t been sent there for, you know... treatment, as it were.”

“So, we’re all going to Heaven or Hell after this?” Kath sounded hopeful. She obviously thought she was destined for Heaven.

“Afraid not, luv. After the final sin was committed, God forsook you all. You’re all coming downstairs with me to whichever level you deserve.”

“Level we deserve?” Kath sounded worried.

Lucas nodded. He seemed to be getting a bit impatient now as they continued through the snow. “The levels dish out appropriate punishment. A murderer gets murdered. Over and over. Forever. A rapist gets raped. A bully gets beaten. You get the general theme here, right?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Kath shut up and

stayed that way, seemingly lost in disturbing thought.

“That just leaves you,” said Harry. “You still haven’t told us what part you have to play in all this. You’re the Devil, which means you’re evil and can’t be trusted...doesn’t it?”

Before Lucas had chance to reply, Harry realised that, once again, they were surrounded.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“They’re not going to give up are they?”

“No,” Lucas confirmed. “Not until they have you.”

Harry raised the broom in front of him, hoping it would work as well as last time. “What will they do to me?”

“Send you to Hell.”

Harry nodded. “Thought so.” He

eyed up the line of Angels, wondering which one he should go for first. He decided to do as he did last time and aim for the middle, but before he had chance, a pillar of fire zigzagged towards him, sending him into a sideways dive. The snow cushioned his fall but was still jarring enough to knock the smut-handled broom from his grasp.

Harry looked up just in time to see another wall of flames arcing in his direction. He rolled over, barely managing to dodge the burning death, but found himself even further away from his only weapon. “Lucas,” he shouted. “The broom.”

Lucas nodded, searched the snow, located the broom, and then went for it. He was too slow though and Kath got to it first.

“Great,” said Harry. “Throw it here.”

Kath drew her arm back and looked as though she was going to hurl the broom in his direction, but then she didn't release it. Instead she held it in front of herself and started to examine it. “Without this, you have no way of defending yourself, right?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “That's why I need it, now!”

Kath walked away from him and, incredibly, started making her way over to the row of Angels. Specifically, she approached the one in the centre, the one that Harry had intended to attack. She held the weapon in front of herself, keeping the Angels at bay despite the fact that none of them moved an inch. “You just want Harry, right? What will you do for me if I give him to you?”

She waited for an answer from the thing, but received none.

Kath jabbed and wiggled the broom in the Angel’s face, not getting close enough to hit, but making her willingness

to do so clear. “I asked you a question, so have some manners. Remove your hood and answer me!”

Harry was in shock. Firstly, that the woman was betraying him, but secondly that she was addressing an Angel like an impolite five-year-old. It was surreal. Even more surreal was that the Angel did as it was told. It removed its hood.

Beneath the old, grey cloth was something Harry had not expected. Maybe if he thought about what an angelic stereotype would look like it would have been less surprising, but seeing the beautiful face appear from

beneath the tattered hood was not what Harry had expected. The Angel had shining yellow hair that fell in thin tresses across a flawless complexion. His eyes were a breath-taking cyan and the darkness seemed to light up around their gaze. The Angel's piercing blue orbs were currently studying Kath.

Kath was immediately mesmerised and Harry could see the same shock in her face that he no doubt had on his. She still held the broom out in front of her, but it was slowly lowering as though the weight of it was becoming too much.

Lucas moved up beside Harry, "That would be Lord Michael himself."

Harry considered for a moment.
“You mean from the bible?”

“No, I mean from real life. That is God’s Field General himself, Archangel Michael. My brother, the Angel of death.”

Harry looked at Lucas. “If he’s your brother can’t you make him stop?”

“You really don’t understand family do you, Harry boy? One thing about Michael is that the only person he listens to is his Daddy. That’s why he was always favourite. Bloody eejit!”

Harry didn't have time to play agony aunt, something was happening up ahead. The Angel in front of Kath – *The Archangel Michael*. Jeez! – was producing something from within his cloak. Something long and metal that ignited in flames as it was pulled free.

“There she is,” said Lucas. “The beauty herself. You know that back in the day that sword belonged to me? Bastard took it from me during the Holy war. Still, I guess it looks better on him anyway.”

Harry shook his head. “What the bloody hell are you talking about?”

“The fiery sword of damnation. The very sword that turned Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes.”

This is really it, isn't it? The end of the world. God has finally called last orders and I'm stuck here facing down the Angel of Death with his flaming penis extension. If it wasn't so goddamn insane, I think I'd be laughing my ass off.

Harry watched as the Angel raised his sword, burning the cold air and changing it to a thick, acrid smoke. Kath was still mesmerised and Harry wondered if she was under some kind of thrall or if she had just gone into shock

after finally realising the situation she was in. The answer was unimportant as Michael brought down his flaming sword in a vicious snap. It hissed and spat as Kath's blood congealed on its shaft, turning to black powder and peppering the snow. Somehow Kath managed to turn around and face Harry, and for a moment he thought he had only imagined the sword going through her neck.

Then her head started to tilt forward, independent of the rest of her body. Harry saw that the blade had indeed gone through her, so seamlessly that she obviously hadn't felt a thing. Kath's head fell to the snow, spewing

it's fluids into the air like a decorative garden feature. Her body remained standing however, gushing blood more heavily, spraying it into the air like a gory water cannon. The cracked end of her spine poked from her neck, flapping its severed spinal cord like an agitated cobra. Harry winced when Kath's lifeless body finally fell forward and buried itself in the snow and turning it red.

Despite the fact Kath had clearly been a bitch, Harry suddenly felt very isolated by her loss; a lone man surrounded by callous Angels and a wisecracking Devil. He needed Steph more than ever. If this really was 'the

end' then he wanted to be with her.

Harry ran for it, leaving Lucas behind and not seeing any reason to ask him to follow. He ploughed through the snow with all his energy, kicking and clawing with one thing on his mind: *Steph!* He had no idea where he was going and only hoped that it was towards The Trumpet and not away from it. With the apocalyptic freeze, as well as an apocalyptic army of beautiful Angels trying to send him to Hell, Harry knew that the rest of his life was most likely measured in minutes rather than hours. For so long Harry had wanted nothing but to die, to leave the world and all of its pain behind, but right now staying

alive long enough to get to Steph was the only thing on his mind.

The snowfall seemed to increase every second. It was up to Harry's waist and still rising. Before long, there would be no world left. No buildings, no roads, no rivers. Nothing. Just unending snow, rising. Rising. Rising.

Harry struggled onwards, each step seizing up his calves and stabbing the tender muscle with icy daggers. If only he could go back and do the right thing. He knew back then that killing Thomas Morris was wrong, knew it hours before he had watched the glistening light of life leave the man's eyes. He knew it

was wrong even more when he saw the regret and the sorrow in the man's eyes just before he died. Thomas Morris killed Harry's family, but at the moment Harry started to murder him, he knew that the man was sorry. He knew because Thomas never struggled. He accepted the punishment for what he had done and even seemed happy about it.

Now the whole world was accepting punishment for what Harry had done. He imagined the billions of people that had frozen to death in their homes already or that had been callously reaped by the Angels. He wondered how many people were still alive also, trying to convince their children that the

snow would stop soon and that everything would be okay, that it was just bad weather. Harry started to weep, but wiped the tears away. He had to keep going; didn't deserve time to stop and cry. When the Angels finally sent him to Hell he would welcome it, because that was where he belonged, but not now. Not yet.

Up ahead, Harry saw the dark rectangle of a building up on a hill. It had to be The Trumpet, looking down at him from its elevated resting place. With renewed vigour, Harry began to dive and leap through the snow, sinking and wobbling with every step. He was going at a snail's pace, he knew, but

gradually the building was coming into view and it did indeed turn out to be the pub.

“Thank God,” said Harry, before considering the words he’d spoken. “Actually, screw that and fuck God.”

He reached the bottom of the hill and looked up at the pub. It was dark, deserted and lifeless. A dead building in a condemned world, but inside could be the only person Harry cared about anymore. He started to wade through the snow and up the steps, feeling the broken brickwork beneath his feet. Inside his stomach, butterflies rioted.

As he neared the top, Harry felt their presence. He felt the Angels. “Damn you,” he shouted, turning around to face them. They stood at the bottom of the hill, appearing from nowhere. Each had their hoods down now, exposing an endless row of beautiful faces and full heads of blonde and brown gossamer hair. They were flawless – angelic – but Harry knew that they brought only death and misery. “Damn you,” Harry shouted again. “Just let me see her.”

He turned and ran, determined to make it back into the pub where he would be safe. Lucas had said the Angels could not set foot inside a den of

inequity and that meant Steph must still be safe inside. *Nearly there, just a few more feet.*

Harry stopped in his tracks, falling into the snow and looking up at the figure that blocked his way. He thought about defending himself before realising he could not. There was nothing he could use, not even the porno-wrapped broom. Harry looked down at the snow, defeated and not wishing to witness the method of his execution. “Okay, you got me. Just get it over with.”

“Get what over with, Harry Boy?”

Harry looked up. “Lucas!”

“Aye,” Lucas offered out his hand. “I thought you were never going to get here, fella. Took your sweet time.”

Harry smiled, happy to see the Devil. He took Lucas’ hand and hoisted himself up, quickly pushing past and barging against the pub’s door. It was frozen shut. He was just about to cry out in defeat when Lucas strolled up to join him.

“Keep your hair on, lad.” Lucas placed a hand on the door making steam immediately appear. The frost on the metal was melting. After a couple of seconds, Lucas banged his fist once on

the door and it swung open slowly. Lucas looked at him and grinned. “Three millennium in the Hellzone Boy Scouts.”

Harry nodded. “No shit?”

Harry made his way inside and headed for the bar, the sudden feeling of an even, solid floor disorientating his weary legs. The entire room was dark and no longer lit by multiple candles, but Harry had been there enough times to know where he was going. He made it to the bar in six blind steps and was shocked to find Peter’s dead body on the floor. Harry could only just make out the boy’s features as all but one of the

bar's candles had extinguished. It wasn't something he had time to mull over now though. He'd pay his respects later.

Grabbing the remaining candle, Harry made his way behind the bar and into the corridor behind. Right away the freezing temperature told him something was wrong. Earlier the corridor had acted as a flume for the warm air of the fire in the cellar, but now it was cold. That meant the fire was out.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Harry took the steps two at a time, luckily making it down to the bottom without misstepping in the darkness. As his feet

planted on the cellar floor, he moved the candle in a quick semi-circle in front of him. The room smelt heavily of smoke, but the barrel fire was unlit. Next to it was the unmoving form of Old Graham. Until tonight, Harry had never seen a recently dead body before – not even his wife and child as they had died in the hospital – but he now knew without inspection that the old man had perished. Harry felt his gorge rise, the fear and sickness taking a hold of him as his mind screamed out with grief. He span around, illuminating the dark corners of the cellar, searching desperately

He found Damien first and

crouched down to feel the lad's cheek. It was stone cold and Harry realised he was dead too. What concerned Harry most was that Damien's mid-section was covered in blood and that, despite the cold, the boy did not have on his thick puffer jacket. *Did somebody stab him?*

The answer came to Harry quickly.

Nigel? Damn it. I can't believe I knocked Damien out when he was the one who saved Steph all along. Now he's dead and I'll never get to say sorry for my mistake.

Beside Damien, beneath the same pile of duvets, was Jess. *Dead as well,*

Harry immediately noticed. He felt numb at the sight of such a young and pretty girl frozen to death like a block of ice. He shone the candle to her face and saw that her lips were blue and starting to frost over.

Then Harry noticed a third body beneath the blankets. He was paralysed, not wanting to move because that meant he would have to acknowledge whatever he would find beneath the final blanket.

Steph lay, swaddled up to the eyeballs by a lasagne of sheets and blankets, half-a-dozen layers deep. She looked as delicate and as beautiful as Harry had ever seen her and he finally

allowed himself to cry. He reached out and touched her face. Like the other's it was ice cold. She was wearing Damien's puffer jacket. *Probably knew he was dying with or without it. He must have wanted her to have it instead. It wasn't enough though.*

Harry shook his head, a deep darkness spreading throughout his soul. There was nothing else left. "I'm sorry," he said to Steph's unmoving form. "I'm sorry that I caused all this and that I never got to say goodbye. I used to think I came here every night to get drunk and forget about the past, but tonight I realised that I kept coming back to see you. You were the only person

that allowed me to see that there would be a tomorrow and that it would be easier than today. It was you that took away my pain, not the booze, but thanks to me there will be no more tomorrows.”

“...Harry?”

The word was soft, below even a whisper, but he heard it. A few moments passed and Harry started to think that his crippled mind was perhaps just playing tricks on him.

But then he heard it again.

“Harry,” Steph whispered again, louder this time.

She's alive!

“Steph! Steph, can you hear me?”

It didn't seem like she could, but she knew he was there. It was obvious by the look in her eyes. “Harry...I... missed you.”

“I missed you too, Steph.”

She smiled. “I knew you'd come back. I always knew you were a good man. That you...would end up being my hero...one day.”

Harry was stunned. “I wish that

were true, Steph. I really do, but I let you down. I let everyone down.”

Steph shook her head, eyes still closed as though she were reciting a dream. “No, Harry. The only person you ever let down is yourself. You’re a good man, but you don’t...you don’t see it.”

Harry wiped the tears and snot from his face. “You know what I wish, Steph?”

“No, Harry. What do you...wish?”

“I wish that instead of killing Thomas Morris that night, I’d have met

you instead. Maybe you could have saved me...saved everything.”

Steph's face lit up in a smile, but then went still. She didn't reply.

“Steph,” Harry said, softly. “Hey, Steph, I just realised that you were my second chance. I'm sorry I blew it, but I'm going to put it right.”

Harry moved forward and kissed Steph on her lips. He wanted nothing more than for her to be alive a moment longer so that she could kiss him back, but he knew that she was gone. *At least I got to say goodbye.*

Harry stood up straight, tensing his cold muscles and testing each one to make sure they were still working and not completely frozen yet. Despite taking the steps two at a time on the way down, he took them individually on the way up, taking his time to digest just what he intended to do. He lit the corridor above with his candle and made his way to the bar. Lucas was already there waiting for him

Just the man I want to speak to.

“Harry Boy,” Lucas’s normal chirpiness was gone and he sounded solemn, like a guard on death row. He handed over a beer and took one for

himself, lids already removed. Harry decided whatever happened, it would be the last beer he ever drank. *One for the road.*

“Lucifer,” said Harry, sipping the beer. “It’s time isn’t it?”

Lucas nodded. “It’s up to you, lad. To be honest I’m only here tonight because I’m duty-bound. The apocalypse and all that, you know? It’s kind of traditional.”

“That can’t be the reason.”

Lucas laughed his charming Irishman laugh. “No, you’re right. The

truth of it is that Michael summoned me here to see the destruction of mankind. I guess they think I had a hand in bringing down the ceiling – in leading men astray and all that.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, didn’t you?”

Lucas swigged his beer down to the bottom third. “Well, yes and no. When I first fell from Heaven I hated you all – God’s most prized creation – and I sought to corrupt you all. I wanted to spoil God’s work and his image that lived in all of you, but you know what I found out?”

“What?” said Harry.

“I realised that I was wasting my time. Men were doing a fine thing of fucking stuff up on their own. I had a hand, here and there, sure, but Hitler, Bin Laden, Bundy, the nuclear-fuckin-bomb? All that shit was on you. The worst, most corrupt men that ever lived are mostly people I’ve never met.”

“Then why does Heaven blame you? Why have they brought you here to watch us die?”

“Because I fell in love with humanity. At first I rebelled against God because I wanted to live by my own

rules and I sought about destroying you all, but after a while I realised that man wasn't in God's image, he was in mine. Men have spent hundreds of years fighting for their freedom just the same way as I and some of my brothers did against Heaven. Few hundred years ago, I stopped trying to destroy you and started living amongst you. I buried my anger with God and stopped being the bogeyman you write about in your religious texts. I'm no different to you all and just as sad to see that the party's all over. The only reason I'm forced to witness it all end is for them to make a point."

"What point?" Harry asked.

“To prove that anyone that goes against God will not be tolerated. Me included.”

Harry laughed.

“Why do you laugh, Harry Boy?”

“Nothing. I guess I just find it amusing to find out that the Devil is benevolent and God is wrathful.”

Lucas laughed too. “Well, I hope it teaches you to not always believe what the media says. Especially the ancient Aramaic right-wing media. The bible got me all wrong, I tell you.”

The two of them shared a laugh and finished their beers. After a few moments, Harry put his empty bottle on the bar.”

“Time to go, I guess, but before I do, can I ask you a question?”

Lucas shrugged. “You’ve done little else for the past few hours. Why stop now?”

Harry took that to mean, yes. “You mentioned the levels of Hell, earlier?”

“Aye.”

“Which is the worst?”

Lucas didn't seem comfortable by the question. “Well...it's all relative, really. The punishment tends to fit the crime.”

“I know that!” Harry was becoming impatient. He could feel his body shutting down under the constant attack of the cold and he had to finish this before he gave in to hyperthermia. “But surely some layers are worse than others. Where do the very worst go, like Judas Iscariot and Hitler? People like that?”

Lucas thought before he answered.

“Well, if you listen to Dante Alighieri then there are just seven levels, but in truth the regions of Hell are never ending. Time and space there is eternal, but there is a deepest level reserved only for pure evil. Light does not exist there and neither does hope of any kind. It is suffering and despair without beginning and without end; a place where Evil reigns and flays the skin of any soul that dare venture there. It is a Hell beyond human understanding and no human, not even the vilest, has ever committed sin harsh enough to be sent there. It is deserving of no man. It was created to hold *me*.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “A Hell

so bad that it was made to torture the Devil himself?”

Lucas nodded and seemed upset by the thought of it. “Aye, they call it...The Abyss.”

Harry took that information in and held onto it. *The Abyss. The darkest, most desperate level of hell that is fit only for the Devil himself. A place of torture beyond anything a man could imagine. Okay, got it.*

“Lucas,” Harry said. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you and I sincerely hope that the Abyss never claims you. Sounds strange to say, but I think you

might actually be one of the good guys.”

Lucas laughed. “I have many names, but that’s a first.”

Harry shook the Devil’s hand and walked away, leaving his candle on the bar and entering the darkness.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Harry opened The Trumpet's door and looked out over the landscape. The blizzard had finally begun to die down, its job almost completed. The world had been rendered featureless. Everywhere Harry looked was pure-white and buried beneath giant snow banks. Across the street, the tops of buildings were just about visible, but their doorways were covered up past their tops. Harry had a feeling that Lucas had something to do with The Trumpet not yet being buried.

At the bottom of the hill stood the Angels, lined up and stretching on forever like the Great Wall of China.

Although that's probably buried along with everything else. The world's greatest achievements reduced to featureless, white, nothingness.

Harry hailed them. "I'm coming over. I give up, okay?"

The blond Angel in the centre – *Michael?* – nodded. Then he lifted his arms out in front of him and shot fire.

"Hey!" Harry protested. "I said

I'm coming!"

Harry thought he was about to get fried but soon realised that wasn't Michael's intention. In front of him the steps had been cleared of snow, melted by a rapidly disappearing river of fire. "Oh, er...cheers."

Harry took the newly uncovered steps slowly, in no rush to test out the theory he had in his head.

*I guess time doesn't mean much
when you're eternal*

The Angels stood patiently, seemingly happy to wait for him.

Michael had taken a step forward, exiting the line. When Harry reached the bottom of the steps, he saw that Michael was smiling reassuringly, like a Dentist about to perform a root canal.

“Welcome, Sinner,” said Michael in a far softer voice than he had in the previous instances when Harry had heard him speak. His presence was no less awesome.

“Can we just use ‘Harry’ for now, yes?”

“As you wish, Harry Jobson.”

“Just ‘Harry’ is fine...you know,

don't worry about it.”

Michael bowed his head at Harry as if there was a great pity that he was forced to acknowledge. It made Harry angry, but he couldn't let it distract him.

“Are you ready? It is time.” said the Angel.

“I just have a couple of questions to ask first.”

Michael looked at him and something that Harry thought was anger streamed through the archangel's eyes.

Obviously, The Angel of Death

doesn't appreciate being delayed by a mere mortal. I bet he thinks it's 'impertinent'.

Harry wanted to laugh in the Angel's face.

Michael seemed to calm himself as he spoke again. "Ask your questions quickly, Sinner."

There's that word again. Fucker!

Harry nodded, also wanting to hurry things along, before he lost his nerve. "After what I did; after I committed the....final sin, or whatever, it condemned everyone to Hell, right?"

Michael nodded.

“Do you think that’s fair?”

Michael was visibly annoyed. “It is His will.”

Harry nodded. “Right, right, didn’t think appealing to your better nature would work, so I guess I should skip straight to plan B.”

“Plan B?” Michael repeated, confused.

“Yeah, I want to make a deal.”

Michael exploded, but managed to do so without moving an inch. He seemed to oppress the air around him. “YOU DO NOT MAKE DEALS WITH AN AGENT OF HEAVEN. YOUR WILL IS INCONSEQUENTIAL TO HIS DECISIONS. YOU WILL OBEY, SINNER.”

“Okay, okay, but my final wish is just that you hear me out. If He ignores my offer then so be it and I will take what comes to me.”

Michael begun laughing and Harry was disturbed by how much like a child it sounded. “Okay, mortal, I will allow you to amuse me. Speak your deal.”

Okay, here goes.

“Send me to the Abyss.” Michael actually seemed to flinch at the suggestion and Harry hoped that it was a good sign. “Don’t send me to whatever Hell I deserve, send me to the Hell that no man deserves. Send me there and leave me there forever.”

Michael seemed to soften, no longer angry. It almost seemed like he was suddenly in awe of Harry. “You speak of things that you could never hope to understand, Harry Jobson. The Abyss is a punishment befitting no man. Why would you ask for such endless

suffering?”

“I’ll tell you, but first let me know, can it be done? Can you send me there?”

Michael nodded. “Yes.”

“Then my offer is that you send me to the Abyss in exchange for all of the souls that have been damned to Hell since I murdered Thomas Morris. Save Steph, Jess, Jerry, and all the other people that don’t deserve Hell and instead send me to the Abyss to pay for humanity’s sin. Will my torture there outweigh the debt needed by sparing these people?”

Michael shook his head and began to sob. The sight of it was almost heart-wrenching – the very act of an Angel crying seemed to be the embodiment of the word ‘*tragedy*’. “The debt of suffering would be a thousand times more than that which is owed. You cannot imagine the suffering. You should not make such frivolous suggestions without knowing the full consequence of what you suggest. It would be forever and you wish to make that decision on a romantic whim. You are a fool, Harry Jobson.”

Harry stepped forward and was amazed to see Michael wince.

Apparently, talk of the Abyss was enough to make the Angel very anxious. Harry knelt down. “Then show me what I seek and then let me decide.”

“So be it,” said Michael, placing both of his hands upon Harry’s head.

What happened next was indescribable. Images and feelings shot through Harry’s very soul, showing him inhuman tortures at the hands of even more inhuman creatures. It was a place of endless and unimaginable pain and suffering. A place where every single second lasted centuries and was enough to break a man’s mind into a million horrified splinters. It was eternal agony

in a place where only evil and sadness existed. It was the heart and soul of Hell itself.

Harry shot back from Michael's grip, falling onto his back and panting. Tears fell from his eyes and already his soul felt damaged just from seeing images of the Abyss.

Can I do this?

Harry dragged himself up off the floor, weak and terrified. He took the steps needed to take him toe to toe with Michael. After what he had just witnessed, Harry found it hard to breath and even harder to talk.

But he had to do this.

“Spare their souls,” he said. “Send me to...the Abyss.”

Michael seemed sad, in fact the Angel's very being seemed to turn to sadness itself. “So be it, Harry Jobson.”

God's Angel of Death reached forward to place his hands on Harry's forehead, but just as he expected to feel the touch of the Angel's fingers searing his soul from his flesh, something else happened.

Michael took a step backwards and looked up at the sky; so did all of the other Angels, forming a never-ending line of stargazing figures. Harry looked up at the black sky too, but could see nothing but stars and a full moon. Harry wasn't happy about the delay because it gave him an opportunity to back out of his crazy request for eternal damnation.

No Harry, you decided to do this, and that's exactly what you're going to do. Steph and the others don't deserve to go to Hell because of my crimes.

Michael was smiling and a feeling of joy seemed to cascade from the archangel in bright, colourful waves. He

looked at Harry and nodded, as if he knew something that he did not. “Goodbye, Harry Jobson,” said Michael as he placed his hands on Harry’s skull.

The pain of Harry’s soul being ripped from his body was exquisite. Like having a thousand fish hooks dragged through the insides of his body. *The pain’s already starting,* Harry feared as his soulless husk of a body fell to the floor.

Epilogue

A news reporter came onscreen. She was enveloped by an over-sized pink ski-jacket. “Good evening, I’m Jane Hamilton, reporting for Midland-UK News. Fortunately, after nearly 19-inches of snow, the weather finally seems to be improving. Temperatures have already begun to rise and the snow is predicted to end soon. Roads will soon be in the process of being reopened while rail links are expected to be resumed within the next few d-“

Harry found himself at the bar of The Trumpet. It didn't happen instantly and it felt as though he had flowed back into his body like gravy through a sieve. At first he remembered nothing...

Until the person next to him spoke.

“How you feeling there, Harry Boy?”

Harry almost choked at the sight of the Irishman – *The Devil* – and started to panic as it all came rushing back. *Please, not again. Is this hell? Is this the abyss?*

“Calm there, fella. You made it.

All is well for another millennium or so. The big guy gave you all another chance.”

Harry was stunned. “He...he did?”

Lucas laughed and sipped a pint in front of him. “Don’t act so feckin surprised. It’s what you planned, isn’t it?”

“Well...yeah, but I didn’t expect to be back at the bar. I thought I really would go to the Abyss, or maybe, best-case-scenario, God would let me into Heaven for my good deed. I didn’t expect...this.”

“Well, as it turns out the man-upstairs loves a little sacrifice, here and there, and yours was a biggy. He decided that your final deed was enough to convince him that maybe humanity still had a fighting chance. Good on you, lad! Though you’re the only one that can remember any of it, so don’t expect a fanfare.”

Harry shook his head, blinking, and feeling like he’d just awoken from a dream. “So why are you here? Here now, I mean?”

“Because I wanted to give my thanks. I like this crazy, fecked-up world as much as anyone, and without it

I wouldn't have a thing to do but sit around in an overcrowded Hell. Truth is I knew there was a chance you might turn things around.”

“That's why you were here wasn't it? To help me?”

Lucas hushed him and looked left and right shiftily. “Keep your voice down. If Michael and his choir of gayboys heard that, they'd be after me with their self-righteous wings all in a flap. I didn't come to help you. I just wanted to make sure you were... properly informed.”

Harry nodded and smiled, looking

around the brightly-lit bar and feeling more hope than he had since Toby was born. “Well, Lucas,” he said, “if you didn’t fill me in on what was happening then I wouldn’t have had a clue. I certainly wouldn’t have made the deal I did. If you hadn’t turned up we’d all be in Hell, so...thank you. For a Devil you’re sure not what I expected... Lucas?”

The Prince of Hell had departed, disappearing without Harry or anybody else noticing. Harry hoped Lucas had stayed long enough to hear him say thanks.

At the end of the bar, Harry noticed

Old Graham sitting alone, drinking by himself. Harry smiled, finding it ironic that he was so happy to see the old codger. Harry made his way over to Old Graham who looked up as he approached.

“Hey, Harry,” he said.

Harry sat on the stool next to the old man. “Hey, Graham. You’re into History and all that aren’t you? Weren’t you in the army?”

Old Graham beamed proudly. “That I was, ten long years. In the Signals I was. Hit the Falklands a full hour before the SAS did. Yet they get

all the glory.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry. “I wanted to learn more about the past, and about brave men like you. I was thinking about going to the Imperial War museum at the weekend. Would you like to come with me and be my guide?”

For a moment, Harry thought the old man was going to fall off his stool. Then he gathered himself together and nodded enthusiastically. “You know I haven’t been out of this bloody town in eight years. I would love to come, Harry. Thank you, I mean it.”

Harry patted him on the back.

“Good. We’ll have to make a regular thing of it. Right now though, I’ve got to go, so I’ll come by tomorrow night to see you. You’ll be here right?”

Old Graham laughed. “Does the Devil have horns?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I think you’d be surprised.”

Old Graham obviously didn’t understand and Harry was glad about that. Knowledge of the night’s previous run of events was a burden he was more than happy to shoulder alone. He walked over to the centre of the bar where he had been speaking to Lucas

before he disappeared. *Back to Hell or wherever.* On the other side of the wooden surface was someone he wanted to talk to very much.

Steph spun around and smiled when she saw him. Harry couldn't forgive himself for ever ignoring how beautiful she was. He would make up for it though.

“Harry,” she said to him. “Another drink?”

Harry shook his head. “No thanks, I’ve given up.”

Steph looked at him in

bewilderment. “What since five minutes ago?”

Harry nodded and grinned. “It seems like longer, but yes I have. Time to start living my life in better ways.”

Steph seemed genuinely happy. “Good for you, Harry.” Then suddenly her expression flipped upside down and she seemed very sad. “Does that mean you won’t be coming in here anymore?”

“Maybe,” said Harry. “Which is why I wanted to know if you’d come to dinner with me on your next night off.”

Steph’s face lit up. “I’d love to.

I'm free Thursday night.”

Harry reached out and took Steph's hand. She seemed embarrassed but he could tell that she also liked the feel of the two of them touching. “Then it's a date. You can tell me all about this pet grooming business you're going to set up.”

Steph was surprised. “How did you know about that?”

“I don't know,” said Harry, “but I want to learn all about it, and all about you. Right now I have to go, so I'll be back tomorrow night to arrange with you.”

Harry left Steph in a fluster behind the bar and moved towards the exit. Damien was lay across the coach, enjoying the fire. As Harry got closer Damien noticed him staring. The boy stood up.

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“You don’t agree with this either,”
Lucas stated.

Gabriel shook his head futilely.
“My opinion is of no consequence.”

“No being should accept slavery as
a birth right, neither Angel nor Man. To
be created is not an obligation to
servitude. We have the right to our own
opinions. You should have joined me

long ago, brother.”

Gabriel swiped a hand through the air and fried the falling snowflakes that were unlucky enough to touch him. “Blasphemy! Your unrighteous war sought to enslave man. Now you speak to me of such things as free will?”

Lucas shrugged and resumed his Irish accent. He no longer felt like showing reverence of respect. He was more human than Angel. “Well, a fella can change his mind now, can’t he? In fact the almighty father changes his own every five minutes so it seems.”

“He is your father too and you will

“speak ill of him no more. The time for wrath has arrived and you are summoned to be its witness. Your hand in Armageddon is such that you deserve a front row seat.”

Lucas wasn't about to accept any more of this pious nonsense. “Look, Gabriel. I know you spend your weekends at Vegas, counting cards and downing Amaretto cocktails like you're trying to put out a fire in your belly, so why don't you cut the bullshit and start speaking a wee bit of the truth. How can I stop this?”

Gabriel seemed to think for a moment before letting out a sigh that

seemed to signal his walls coming down slightly. “Brother, you cannot. While my own fondness of humanity, and its vices, is something I admit too, I will not defy my Lord. Not all can have your strength of rebellion – and not all would even want it. It is done. A concordant has been met and at this very moment a plague of Angels descends to the Earth like you once did – thousands of falling stars ready for retribution. All life will be extinguished.”

Lucas couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was this lack of rational compromise that turned him against Heaven in the first place. He didn't miss it. “There are...loop holes?”

“Perhaps,” said Gabriel, already turning to walk away. “But can you remember them?”

Lucas shook his head. “I can’t, it was too long ago. Gabriel stop, I need answers.”

Gabriel turned back around. “I cannot remain here, Lucifer. I have... duties. If you need answers, perhaps you will find them in there.”

The Angel pointed and Lucas spun around. Behind him, on that hill, was a pub called The Trumpet. Lucas smiled to himself.

A drink sounds like a bloody good idea right about now.

NEWS AND WEATHER

“This is Jane Hamilton, signing off for Midlands-UK News.” Jane handed her microphone to a production assistant and let out a shiver. She was wearing a huge pink ski-jacket but the cold was still getting through. “Was that okay, Steve?”

Her cameraman, Steve, gave her a thumbs up. “Perfect. There might have been a slight issue with snow on the lens, but nothing we could do with things the way they are. “

“I know, it’s crazy, right?” Jane

looked down from the motorway bridge and examined the tipped-over transit van. She had no idea what the contents were, spilled all over the snow, and each second only shrouded them further in layers of fine white powder. As a professional news reporter, Rule One was always to remain unaffected by the stories she was reporting, but this one gave her the willies. All of the meteorologists back at the studio were flummoxed by the recent weather – a few went so far as to say it was impossible. She took their expert opinions very seriously and had some serious anxiety about what the coming days would bring. People had already started dying and she couldn't help but

worry that the toll would continue to rise substantially.

“You okay, Jane?”

She let out a breath and watched it steam in front of her face. “Yeah, Steve. Thanks. I just don’t like this cold.”

“You want me to get one of the guys to fetch you a coffee from the van? There’s still a bit left in the Thermos.”

Jane cringed at the thought of the stale taste of lukewarm coffee from a flask. “No, thanks, that’s okay. I just want to get back to the studio. There’s

going to be other things to report before the night is through, I can feel it.”

“You’re probably right,” agreed Steve. “We’ll get going in a few minutes. Mike and Tony are just trying to dig the van loose.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “What?”

Steve tutted. “Hard to believe, but in the short time you were reporting, the snow was heavy enough to cover the wheels.”

“Oh, hell!”

Steve waved a hand. “Don’t worry

about it, Kitten. We'll be gone in a jiffy."

Jane narrowed her eyes. "I told you to stop calling me that. We're not together anymore."

"Pity," said Steve. "You look hot in that ski-jacket."

Jane laughed and decided to head for the van. The snow was beginning to melt through her boots and her thick socks were becoming soaked. It was hard to walk and, after only a few steps, her calves began to ache. She wanted nothing more than to wrap up warm at home with a DVD and her cat,

Thompson, but she knew the night would be long. At times like this it was all hands on deck. The freak weather conditions would keep every news channel in the world busy until its cause was known.

“Hey, Mike, how’s it going?”

Mike was kneeling next to the van, mini-shovel in hand. “My hands are so numb you could put them on a pair of tits and I wouldn’t even know.”

“Charming,” said Jane, laughing. “I guess I should stay out of the van until you’re done. My weight would probably make it harder to get the van

free?”

“Dunno,” said Mike, “but don’t worry about it. I’ll manage.”

“You’re a dear,” said Jane. She patted him on the head and stepped into the van via the side door, then slid it shut after her. The van was slightly warmer than outside, but was still uncomfortably chilly. A bank of blinking monitors lined one side and she sat on the stool in front of them. The monitor on the left showed the studio feed that was currently going out live to the nation. The monitor on the right showed the feed from Steve’s camera outside – the images were still streaming but were not

being recorded. Back at the studio, one of her colleagues was interviewing an ecology expert. He was currently refuting claims that a damaged Ozone layer could be the cause of all the snow.

Something caught her attention on the other monitor. The camera mounted on a tripod outside had picked up the image of Tony, the other production assistant. He was currently taking a piss off the top of the bridge to the deserted road below.

“Nice,” Jane commented, shaking her head. Steve was in the picture too, speaking on his phone. He was probably checking in with the studio to

confirm it was okay to come in. Beyond them both of the men, though, was something else: a dark shape in the background, partly out of focus and obscured by the snowfall.

What is that?

The shape seemed to be coming closer, heading towards Steve and Mike at the centre of the bridge. Jane leant closer to the screen to try and make out some further details. The dark shadow didn't seem like another person. It was closer to a small vehicle than anything else – perhaps a motorcycle.

As Jane continued watching, the

shadow continued getting closer. Inch by inch, the shape revealed itself. When it became clearer, Jane was even more confused.

“What the...?”

It appeared to be an animal of some kind; a huge dog maybe – but too big and too hairy. It was creeping up slowly behind Tony, who was still taking a leak.

Jesus, is that guy part-camel or what?

Jane kept waiting for Tony or Steve to notice the creature, but they did not.

She tried urging them through the monitor to look around, but of course she knew it was hopeless – she wasn't telepathic. Just when she was about to lean out of the van and shout for their attention, the creature made itself known to the two men outside.

The over-sized hound pounced at Tony from behind, crushing him up against the bridges railings. The monitor didn't give out sound but Jane could hear his startled cries from inside the van anyway. The bloodcurdling screams that followed were unpleasant enough, but twinned with the disturbing images on the feed monitor they were horrifying. The beast outside had pinned Tony to the

ground and was ripping and tearing at his back. The snow turned red all around.

Steve realised the situation and made a run for it, most likely heading for the van. He exited the view of the camera and Jane was left wondering how close by he was. A second later her stomach turned as she watched the hound-beast leaving the mutilated corpse of Tony behind to give chase to Steve.

Jane stared at the monitor and tried to control her breathing. Steve's screams were coming closer and it wasn't long before she heard Mike's join them. Outside of the van the two

men were being attacked by something she couldn't describe – something unnatural.

Banging at the van door.

“Jane, let me in. Open the door.”

It was Steve.

Jane stared at the door handle and found herself unable to move from her seat. Every part of her mind screamed at her to let Steve in, but every fibre of her nerve-endings refused to let her move. Steve continued to scream as ripping sounds began. Whatever was out there was ripping him to shreds. Mike was probably already dead, and here she

was, hiding like a coward while it all happened only inches away from her.

I just report the news. I don't take part in it.

Steve's screams finally stopped and Jane sat in silence, listening only to the sounds of her own panting breath. She turned back around to face the monitors. The live feed from the studio had gone black, but the camera outside was still recording. On it she could see the snarling face of a jagged-toothed demon appear from off-camera. Then she saw its jaws gape wide and the video feed was no more.

Jane waited in terror for what seemed like an eternity, hoping against all hope that the beast would go away. But it didn't.

The van began to rock as the creature attacked it, trying to get at the prize inside. Jane Hamilton cowered in the rear of the vehicle, knowing it was only a matter of minutes until she joined the recent death toll.

CLOUD COVER

Quinton Barstow was worried. Flying an airliner was nothing new to him; he was more nervous driving a car in actual fact. In a car you have to trust in the driving skills of other people, and trust that people are even paying attention, but in a plane it's just you and the clouds; nothing to crash into and nothing that could go wrong in the engines – there were just far too many ground checks to miss anything. Piloting an airliner was an almost fully-automated and pretty plain sailing – *or*

flying to be more accurate, and excuse the pun. Yet he was worried all the same.

All of the above only applied, however, when the aircraft's electrical systems were responding correctly. This evening they were not, and Quinton could think of no reason why. Any errors with the plane's on-board computers should have been rectified by a quick reset, but he had tried that several times now to no avail. He needed those systems to compensate for what his eyes could not see. The current weather was making his natural vision near-useless.

“I can’t believe they cleared us to fly in this,” said Quinton’s co-pilot, James.

“They didn’t see it coming,” replied Quinton. “The weather reports for the week ahead were mostly clear. All of this cloud cover doesn’t make any sense.”

“You think we should bring her down at the nearest airport?”

Quinton looked at his dials and meters. The spindles spun and flickered without any sense of reason. They were flying blind. “I’m beginning to think so.”

“Okay,” said James. “I’ll try and contact ground support at Paris. They should be able to receive us.”

Quinton nodded his agreement and continued to examine his controls. The autopilot navigation system was displaying random error codes in sequence, as if it could not decide what its problem was. The dials continued to spin and the altitude indicator seemed to think that the plane had banked to the left 90-degrees. In twenty years of flying, Quinton had not witnessed such a catastrophic failure of instrumentation.

“I can’t reach anyone,” said James without any sign of exaggeration.

Quinton looked at him. “What?”

James thumbed at buttons and switches on the console but gave up with concerned sigh. “I’m getting nothing but static.”

“That’s nonsense. De Gaulle is only thirty-miles away.

“They’re not responding. I’m not even sure they’re reading us.”

Quinton did not like this at all. “Okay, we’ll hold position in the area for thirty minutes. Keep trying to reach someone. Try Heathrow.”

James nodded uncertainly and went back to twisting dials and flicking switches. Quinton would have liked to have inputted some commands into the guidance system and gone and stretched his legs, but the way things were, meant that he had to remain at the plane's manual controls. He steered in a steady curve, planning to circle until they spoke to someone on the ground.

As was natural to an airline pilot in the 21st Century, Quinton began to worry about the bogeyman of all frequent flyers. He wondered whether his aircraft had been the target of terrorists. Had the on-board systems been

tampered with in the effort to bring the plane down? Was this just step one of 9/11 part two?

No. Something told Quinton that his concerns were misplaced. For all the effort and planning it would take to disable a plane's systems so entirely, it would be just as easy to plant a bomb on board or hijack the cockpit. Whatever was going on here had to be down to some other cause. Quinton couldn't understand why, but he felt that it had something to do with the weather.

A knock at the cockpit's door startled Quinton and he spun around on his cabin chair. After a hostess

identified herself, he pressed the lock release and a red light above the door turned green. Samantha entered with a mug of coffee for both him and James. Coffee was as necessary to a pilot's job as aircraft fuel and he couldn't have welcomed anything more at that moment. He took one of the steaming mugs from the hostess and thanked her. She looked back at him with a scrunched up expression that he supposed meant she had an issue to raise with him.

“What is it?” he asked her.

She took in a breath as though she had many words to get out. “It's really bizarre. I don't even know how to

explain it really. At first it was just one or two passengers but then more and more people started to complain, and now I think it's everyone."

"Spit it out," Quinton told her.

"Okay, okay. Well, it would appear that anything electrical has gone a bit haywire. The passenger's phones, ipads, mp3 players, et cetera have all gone a bit...funny."

Quinton raised an eyebrow.
"Funny?"

Samantha nodded. "All the displays have gone squiggly as if

something is interfering with them.”

Quinton turned around and looked at his own malfunctioning gadgets. Something wasn't adding up here, and anything unknown aboard a plane could be extremely dangerous. He leant forward and pressed the intercom button. The normal *ding!* sound did not occur. In fact nothing happened at all.

“Damn it! The intercom is down. Samantha could you inform the passengers to turn off all electrical devices. Tell them that...we're passing through an electrical storm and leaving them on could permanently damage them. Also, please inform them that we

will be performing an unscheduled landing due to adverse weather conditions.”

Samantha nodded, but didn't seem comforted by his suggestions. Quinton couldn't blame her, he wasn't either. He turned to his co-pilot. “You got anything, James?”

James' bleak expression told him the answer was no.

Quinton bit at his lip. There were no protocols for this. In the event of system failure, the plane needed to land, without question, but the danger of coming down unguided in the thick snow

blizzard that hid beneath the cloud cover would be a near suicide-mission. The situation was dire, and as Captain it was his responsibility to decide what to do next.

“Okay, James, enough. We’re going to bring her down.”

The co-pilot’s eyes went wide. “We’re going to land blind?”

“What choice do we have? I would rather that then run the risk of falling out of the sky if the engines fail.”

James nodded. Quinton knew the other man thought he was right. It just

didn't make the decision any easier.

“Okay,” said James. “Reducing speed. Descending to 20,000 feet.”

Quinton prayed that the plane's landing gear would deploy when approaching the runway. Being mechanical, he hoped they would. After all, the flaps and rudders were all responding.

Many tense minutes of ensuing silence were eventually broken when James spoke again. “Cruising at 20,000 feet. Runway is approximately twenty miles out.”

“Reduce altitude to 10,000 feet.”

James did as he was instructed and Quinton looked at his dials out of habit despite the fact they were currently useless. Once he reminded himself of this, he instead chose to look out of the cockpit's wide, glass window. Now that the plane was descending, he could see the bulbous clouds below more clearly. They seemed unending, letting no light from below make it through. Which was why Quinton thought it inordinately strange when he saw several bright lights coming from above the plane.

He craned his neck to get a better

viewing angle and saw that more than a dozen glowing spheres had appeared in the sky. They seemed to be falling, like meteorites, but Quinton knew that wasn't what they were. He knew that, because they were falling too slowly, not free-plummeting the way a lump of space debris would.

“What the hell is that,” asked James, suddenly noticing.

Quinton stared out at the descending lights and wondered that himself. The way they moved was almost gentle, as if they had some great purpose that could not be rushed. It was then that a blinding light also filled the

cabin.

The two pilots cried out and shielded their eyes, holding onto their chairs as they fought to stay seated. Mere seconds later, the light had gone again, and Quinton opened his eyes. The lights outside were still falling, but something inside the cabin had been altered. Something unexplainable.

Quinton looked down at his instruments with horror as he realised that they were no longer there. All that remained was a blackened husk of metal where dials and equipment used to be. The smell of ash lingered in the air, and Quinton felt dizzy as he realised

something else.

His dizziness turned to panic.

The engines had stopped. They were going down.

Outside, the bright lights continued falling like stars, Angels from heaven. The plane fell faster.

WINTER BEFORE LAST

The drive had been a long one. Bristol was a long way from Stoke and the Boxing Day journey had been slow and cautious, the roads slippery with ice and slushed snow. Harry hated winter, hated the cold. In the summer, people came together – BBQs, festivals, zoos, and theme parks – but in the winter people stayed away from each other, wrapped up warm and ignored the outside world. Winter was the season of isolation and loneliness. Yet, out of all the dreary winters of Harry's life, this

one had been the best. Sure it was damp, icy, and grey; sure he had spent the last week with his wife's condescending parents; and sure he was itching to get back to work, but this winter was great for one reason: Toby.

Of course he had spent several Christmases with his son already, but those had been interspersed with work and commitments. This year his furniture business was successful enough that he had been able to leave the running of it to his cousin and take a massive ten days off to spend with Toby and his wife, Julie. It had been total bliss to watch his son open his presents on Christmas morning, ripping open the

packaging on his new bike and then moving on to the wrapped-up Nintendo DS beneath Julie's parent's tree. He'd never seen his son so happy, and he had never been so happy himself. What Julie had gone on to tell him that night had only made the day even more special.

He still couldn't believe she was pregnant.

"You paying attention?" asked Julie, sitting on the passenger seat beside him.

Harry turned to her and smiled. "Yeah, sorry. I'm just so happy. Life is pretty good, huh?"

Julie smirked and shook her head at him. “I think you had a better Christmas than little man.”

Harry glanced back at his sleeping son on the back seat and agreed. In fact, he may have had a better Christmas than anyone.

“Anyway,” said Julie, “you should have come off at junction 16. You just missed it.”

Harry shook his head, annoyed with himself. “Bugger it. Okay, I’ll come off at the next one.”

Julie mumbled something under her breath and Harry just about heard her.

“Did you just call me a fish head?”

Julie shrugged. “Dunno what you’re talking about.”

Harry huffed. “Oh, really? Well it sounded like you called me a fish head.”

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s rich, coming from a dog head.”

Julie hit Harry in the arm, causing him to swerve slightly. “Cheeky sod.”

“Whoa! Watch it, woman, you’ll have me in a ditch.”

Julie laughed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to endanger your perfect driving record.”

“Always pays to be safe. Baby on-board.”

Julie looked back at her son and smiled. She was so beautiful as a mother. There was something about her now, that Harry loved, which had not been there before Toby’s birth. It was something unexplainable to anyone without a child of their own.

Harry was just about to say, I love you, when something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. The sight was followed by a lot of chaotic noise.

“Shit!” Harry saw the vehicle on the opposite side of the motorway swerve. It careened across several lanes and came crashing up against the central reservation several yards ahead. His stomach fluttered and he thanked God for the near-escape, but then the speeding vehicle cartwheeled into the air, flipping the balustrade upon impact and hurtling, end over end, down the other side of the motorway; the lane that Harry was occupying. Harry would

have liked more time to react, but before he even thought to swerve out of the vehicle's path, his entire being seemed to shudder as his consciousness was battered from his body.

Harry opened his eyes and then closed them again. A light had burned his eyes and he had to flutter his eyelids until the dull aching went away. He found himself staring at a blank white ceiling with a small, tinted window looking out at star-filled sky. It was a vehicle; the back of a van perhaps. When a paramedic appeared in his field of view, Harry realised he was lay in the

back of an ambulance.

The woman's name badge read: Penelope. "Hey there," she said. "Everything is okay. You've just been in an accident."

Harry shot up on the stretcher. "My son...my wife?"

The paramedic tried to ease him back down but he resisted. "There are people trying to help them right now."

"Help them? What do you mean?"

The woman looked him in the eye for a moment but could not hold the

gaze. Something seemed to trouble her. Harry didn't feel like getting information about his family second hand from someone else. He pushed the woman aside forcefully and stumbled off of the bed. His legs felt like jelly as he hit the tarmac outside the ambulance. His breathing was painful too, but none of that mattered. He needed to find his family.

There were flashing lights all around him and fluorescent white jackets flitting to and fro. The motorway had been closed off, probably by sideways police cars at the entrance to each junction. Harry staggered forward. There was a huge fire truck up ahead and

it blocked his view any further down the road. People seemed to be congregating in that area and he headed towards them, as fast as his confused feet would take him.

“Excuse me, sir?” A police officer walked up to Harry with a palm raised. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Harry swiped at the hand in his face and snarled. “Where is my family?”

The officer stepped towards Harry, but backed off when he saw that there was no chance of his authority holding any weight. The man tried a different

tact. “They’re being rescued now.”

“Rescued from what?”

The police officer sighed. “My name is Officer Tonks. Why don’t you come and sit down with me and we’ll have a chat about what is going on.”

Harry looked at the man and saw genuine compassion, but that didn’t change the fact that Harry didn’t want a conversation with anyone but his wife. He turned away from the officer and hurried towards the fire truck. The man did not give chase.

Once Harry reached the bright red

vehicle, he saw the wreckage beyond. His brand new Mercedes was a ball of twisted steel and a mangled truck seemed to be entwined with it. Before he knew it, Harry was vomiting all over the floor. Maybe he had a concussion, but he was pretty sure it was purely because of what he was seeing.

Despite his injuries, Harry ran forward, dodging past anybody that tried to stand in his way. Over at the pile of compacted vehicles, two firemen worked at the steel with heavy cutters. When they saw Harry coming at them, wild-eyed, they stepped aside with concern.

It was then that Harry saw what was left of his family. He could make out Julie's crushed face, squashed beneath the Mercedes window strut. One of her eyes seemed to bulge from her socket. Harry fell to his knees and tried to reach out to her, but he could not. As he tried to crawl his way into the car, he saw the mess that had been his son. Toby's body no longer resembled human form. If it were not for bloody scraps of clothing and puckered flesh and protruding bones, Harry would not have even known it was his son.

Harry screamed out, loud enough to reach the moon. Someone pulled him

back by the armpits and he kicked out and struggled. The person turned out to be Tonks and the officer was no longer willing to stand by. He controlled Harry's body with a well-trained grasp of how joints and pressure points worked. Harry was forced by his twisted elbow to walk away from the scene.

“Why?” Harry cried out. “Why are they dead and not me. Why am I fine?”

“I'd say because you're lucky,” said Tonks, “but I think you'd probably hit me. You were thrown free from the car upon impact. So was the driver of

the other car. Your family...well they didn't have the luck that you did. I'm sorry, Harry, I really am."

Harry felt weak and struggled to keep his legs from folding like accordions. "How do you know my name?"

"Paramedics found your driver's license in your wallet. Would you like me to contact anyone?"

Harry shook his head. "...No. I-I will do it later. I want to see my family. I want them out of there."

Tonks nodded. "I know you do.

They're working on it. Let's just get you to the hospital for now. There's no way to deal with something as terrible as this, so don't try."

Any fight Harry might ever have possessed was gone from him now. He allowed the officer to take him by the arm towards the ambulance and he would also let them take him to the hospital too. There was no reason to resist now, no reason to fight...no reason to care. Harry's life was without purpose and always would be from now on.

As he neared the ambulance, Harry noticed something up ahead. There were

two other police officers standing with a weary-looking man. They were breathalysing him. Harry's own breath caught in his chest and the only way he could let it out again was by talking. "Is that the other driver?"

Tonks seemed to stiffen then and started leading Harry at a slightly different angle, putting distance between them and the other officers. "Yes," he said. "He says he doesn't know what happened. He'll be taken in for questioning once the paramedics clear him."

"Why are they breathalysing him?"

“Standard procedure,” said Tonks without missing a beat.

Harry nodded and let the officer think he was satisfied with the answer. Really, he was taking one last, long look at the man that had just murdered his family, and committing his face to memory. Harry realised that, in actual fact, his life still did have a purpose: to take the life of the man that took his.

Enjoy what's left of your life, whoever you are, thought Harry, because I promise that this will be your Final Winter.

THE PEELING OF SAMUEL LLOYD COLLINS

Thursday

My big toenail fell off today. That leaves three on my right foot and two on my left. It stung at first, but now my toe just feels...hot. I'm keeping the nail in an ashtray in the kitchen.

My name is Samuel Lloyd Collins and I suppose, in a way, this is my last will and testament, except I don't have anybody to leave anything to, so I guess this is really just my last testament. Or maybe writing this is merely the closest thing I have to company.

I don't have to be alone. I could go next door and take part in one of their endless political debates that echo through the walls and keep me awake at night. Sometimes I think about yelling at them to 'keep it down', but what would be the use? Politics are high on everybody's agenda right now. One would expect them to be.

Everyone has their own theory on how 'The Peeling' started, but I personally think it was the Arabs. It's always the Arabs, isn't it? Saddam is dead and the Yanks finally got Osama. So what choice did they have left but to go for broke? Everyone assumed their master plan would culminate with a nuclear attack on a major city, but in

many ways this virus is worse. We may have snuffed out the leaders, but their passion for killing, it seems, will never die. You cut the head off a chicken and it runs around like a maniac, spraying anyone nearby with blood. That's what 'The Peeling' is: arterial chicken blood spraying us all with its infectious filth. I guess the Arabs won in the end...

I came down with the sickness on Tuesday. Two days ago. I've already lost a bit of hair and some skin off my testicles, and you already know about the toenails. Funnily enough, my fingernails are currently unaffected, probably the only reason I'm able to write this. I thought about typing this on the computer, but somehow it felt like a

man's final words should be in ink, don't you think? Maybe when it comes right down to it, paper is more permanent than a collection of cheap circuits.

My future is laid out for me now. I'll be dead within a week, give or take a day. The beauty of the Peeling is that it leaves no room for hypothesising. No room for hope. It kills every time, no exceptions. In a way that certainty has allowed me to come to terms and accept my fate. This time next week I will be a bubbling oil-slick of rancid, dissolving flesh. Somehow I'm fine with that.

But I need to know who is responsible for the pain I'm in. I already told you I think it's the Arabs,

but unless I know for sure...Well let's just say that knowing for definite would bring a certain degree of closure to the situation. Of course, the honourable men and women of the Government's various agencies are urgently investigating the origin of this disease and those responsible, but as each second passes, Great Britain withers and dies beneath its second great plague. I just hope to be alive when they determine the guilty party.

Already know it was the Arabs, just need to know for sure...

Friday

I woke up this morning stuck to my pillow. Not because I had been drooling

in my sleep, but because the skin below my left eye had rotted and fused with the cotton. I had to rip the pillow away and half of my face with it. The resulting meld of infected flesh and sickly white cotton reminded me of a surrealist painting, beautiful in a way. Maybe I'll have it framed before I die.

What an odd thing to muse upon! It would not surprise me if I have gone quite mad. I'm already starting to feel delightfully delirious (or maybe that's just the throbbing and burning where my face used to be).

Such good bone structure I was blessed with, but did not know of, until I was today faced with it in the mirror. The bone of my cheek now shows right

through, covered only by several, thin slivers of sinewy gristle. I look like the Phantom of the Opera (albeit a grizzlier version). I wonder what part of me will dissolve tomorrow. That's the fun part of this sickness, I suppose, not knowing which chunk of skin will decompose next. It isn't like typical flesh-eating diseases; they have a point of infection and usually spread systematically. But The Peeling strikes the body at random, necrotising a man's feet before popping up a day later and doing the same to his ears. I've seen hundreds of case photographs and no two victims follow the same path of infection. The only non-variable: it's always fatal. No one understands this disease at all...

...and no one can stop it.
I think it's starting on my chest...

Saturday

I can see my ribs. Two of them, glistening at me like curved piano keys. It's amusing, in some morbidly fascinating way, to see one's inner workings. The pain is starting to subside, and thankfully only throbbed for a few hours in the morning, but the cloying odour inside the house is repugnant. Ideally, I would open the curtains and windows, but I don't wish to be disturbed by the outside world. I would only become resentful of those who still have all of their skin. Besides, it was being around other people that

infected me in the first place, sealing my fate, and I hate them for that! But retaining my humanity is all I have left to focus on for now and resentment will only make that task harder. I have decisions ahead of me that should not be made in temper...

I have been corresponding all day with a trusted associate that is supplying me with up-to-date information on the current pandemic, along with the progress of the on-going Government investigations into the crisis. So far it seems clear that this was a premeditated and focused attack on the western world. The Peeling has, so far, hit 90% of Europe and is seeping its way into the East. USA and South America are also

stricken, worse than we are in fact, but it is unsurprising to me that, as yet, the Arab world is unaffected. I am eager to see just how far into the East the disease spreads before ceasing its journey of human pestilence. I'm guessing that it will be shortly after it runs out of Christian nations to infect.

Sunday

I lost a hand today. Thank God it was my left and that I can still continue writing this. I now have a withered stump that drips periodically with a viscous yellow discharge. It looks similar to the contents of a Cadbury Cream Egg but smells worse than anything I could ever hope to describe to

you now. I suppose it's the aroma of lingering death.

Next door are still at it. Talking incessantly at all hours. I need peace and quiet right now. Time to think. I already informed my colleagues that I would be working from home for the next week and am not to be disturbed under any circumstances. They were not happy, but I'm the Boss, so they'll have to cope. They don't know that I have the sickness, of course, probably too wrapped up in their own fear of it to even consider the possibility. People only worry about themselves nowadays.

My associate emailed today and told me that the infection was definitely engineered – *Wow. What a revelation!*

– and that it was unleashed upon the world at strategic locations: Major cities, along coastal areas so that the disease would work inwards from all directions, eating around the edges of England as though it were a Jaffa Cake with a chewy orange centre...

God what I would do for a box of Jaffa Cakes right now! The stump of my wrist is itching just thinking about it. Perhaps it's excitement?

Anyway, I have sent a reply email asking what is currently known about WHO engineered the disease. That is what I have to know.

Then maybe I can do something about it.

Monday

I have lost an eye today. It is indeed unfortunate, but in a way I am blessed to have persevered this long anyway. Many do not, and at least I have the other eye. My left one just dribbled out of its socket today like an under-boiled egg with its top sliced off: all foamy white and custardy-yellow. I almost laughed when I looked in the mirror. I look like a zombie-pirate.

At least it doesn't hurt. Not physically.

I suspect I have little time left now and I am anxiously awaiting news from my associate. I can feel the illness seizing my internal organs in its corrosive grip and it's only a matter of

time before they start to decay completely. I have already taken to soiling myself involuntarily, so I assume that my intestines are already rotten. I would take a shower to get clean, but the pressure would only shred what remaining skin I have left. For now I will sit and wait for my associate to provide me the information I so desire...

Who is responsible? Who turned me, and most of the free world, into a quivering mass of mutilated flesh?

I wonder if there's any Jaffa Cakes in the pantry.

Tuesday

It has now been one week since I first noticed the skin under my armpit

was peeling away in pus-filled chunks. One week since I realised I was a dead man walking.

Dead man peeling! Ha!

But I am still alive, devoid of nearly all my skin, granted, but alive nonetheless. Moist splatters of pungent flesh litter my home now, whilst foul scabs fall from my body constantly. The only merciful thing about this disease is that I feel nothing.

Nothing except for the soft scraping of insanity inside my fleshless skull.

Wednesday

Today will be my last. I can feel it. My lower legs snapped today when I got out of bed, too rotten and malformed

to bear what little weight my frail body has left. It is of no importance however, as I awakened to something wonderful: *You have mail.*

I am about to drag my withered limbs over to the computer right now, to see what my trusted associate has for me. I will record the email, and my response, for you right here, as I feel it will be important.

Dear Prime Minister.

I sincerely hope that you are keeping well in this time of dire need. Great Britain is within the talons of great turmoil and despair, but I trust that your inspired leadership will see

us through as ever. This shall not be the end of our endless empire and the good people of this nation will go on stronger than before. That is our way and always will be. May Angels sit on our shoulders as God guides our souls through the times ahead. Long live Great Britain.

But without further ado, Prime Minister, I will provide you with the Intel you require. It was discovered at 0300 GMT today that the disease is not contained to western nations as first assumed. In fact we now have reliable information that the infection, commonly referred to as 'The Peeling', was contracted in Turkey and has

quickly spread as far east as Japan. I'm sure you can appreciate, that with the USA also affected, it effectively means the disease has travelled the entire circumference of the world... Yet there is one country that has shown no effects of the illness, despite being surrounded by it on all borders. We have tried to contact that nation's Government but they have declined all opportunities to reply. It now seems a reasonable assumption that the country in question is responsible for this worldwide plague.

That country is North Korea.

As always, I await you orders on

*how to proceed, but I implore you to
act wisely.*

Yours,

General Harvey Whitehead

Dear Harvey

*I was certain it was the Arabs!
Guess we can all be wrong
sometimes...*

*Regardless, since my dear Martha
and the children were taken from me by
this wretched sickness, I have had no
time to mourn them, so I regret to*

inform you that this will be my final act as leader of this nation. I hope that you and your family are well, and remain so. I wish the same for Great Britain.

Without continued procrastination, my orders, in regards to the Godless entity of North Korea, are as follows:

Send the Nukes.

Send them all...

They will not take this world as their own.

Yours regretfully,

*Prime Minister Samuel Lloyd
Collins*

PREVIEW OF ANIMAL KINGDOM

Grand Mal Press, 2011

Chapter One

Joe pulled tight his jacket around him, the biting chill of the autumn air creeping into every crevice of his body and making him shiver. The cold grey of the sky seemed to drizzle down to earth and coat everything with its dullness to the point where it seemed that colour no longer existed in the world. But the dreary weather was not enough to dampen Joe's spirits. Today was a good day. He was spending the day with his

son.

Danny was standing nearby, peering through a set of bars at what looked to be the zoo's famous Silverback gorilla exhibit – but the leafy enclosure was empty, vacant of its illustrious inhabitant.

Must be getting fed, Joe thought as he watched his son's disappointed face. Danny loved animals and would be disappointed that such a rare and magnificent creature was not available for him to see. But, like most eight-year old boys, his attention span soon reset itself, and it wasn't long before he was running off in a separate direction entirely.

“Dad! That man over there is being

attacked by a snake.”

Joe stared down at his son, amazed, as always, that his watery-blue eyes could look so much like his own. “Don’t be silly, Danny,” he said, his warm breath turning to steam in the crisp October air around him. “That’s just the zoo’s snake handler. He’s about to do a show, I think.”

“I wanna go see!” Danny tugged at his father’s arm, deceptively strong for such a slender child wearing a Bret ‘The Hitman’ Hart t-shirt and Velcro trainers. “Hurry, before we miss anything.”

Joe allowed himself to be dragged toward a three-sided lean-to shelter erected besides the zoo’s moss-covered WORLD OF VENOM building. It had

been designed to look as if it were made of bamboo reeds. A uniformed man entered the structure from a rear access and began positioning plastic crates onto a wooden table – all of them containing reptiles of various sizes and descriptions. The man's tanned-leather skin matched his khaki clothing and was weathered, brown and loose. He had a boa constrictor the length of a scaffold pole wrapped around his bony shoulders.

Danny jumped up and down excitedly. "Sweet! I bet that thing could squish him to death, real easy!"

Joe frowned at his son. "Don't be so morbid!"

"Sorry, Dad. I just think it's cool."

“It’s okay. I just want you to think nice things. Come on, let’s get closer.” Joe took his Danny’s hand – half the size of his own – and pushed through the gathering crowd of adults and their children. It wasn’t difficult to get to the front when you were as freakishly tall as Joe. People tended to get out of his way long before he had to ask them.

“Look at the size of that thing, Dad!” At the front of the growing audience – now close to a dozen people – Danny started jumping up and down again, his wispy, blond hair flopping around in the must-smelling breeze. Childish glee oozed off him in ribbons.

The snake handler turned his attention to them both and Joe cringed,

waiting for his son to get a reprimand. *A noisy nuisance.* Fortunately, the uniformed man smiled at them instead.

“Hey there, young un. You like snakes?”

Danny nodded. “Jake the Snake used to have one called Damien.”

The snake handler wrinkled his forehead, readjusted the slithering reptile in his arms, and then said, “Isn’t that a wrestler from years back?”

Danny nodded enthusiastically. “My dad has lots of old tapes and I watch ’em every weekend when I stay over. My bestest favourite is The Undertaker. Check it out!” He spun around to show the man the design on his backpack.

“Undertaker rip?” said the handler, confused.

Danny spun back around and giggled. “No, silly! *Rest in peace*. It’s what The Undertaker says to everyone right before he beats them up with his tombstone.” He rolled his eyes back into his head, so that only the whites were showing, and repeated the words in his best attempt at a gravelly, adult voice.

“Rest...In...Peeeeaaaace.”

The crowd laughed. So did the snake handler, struggling with his giant brown reptile between each chuckle. He pulled the animal down, away from his face, and then smiled over at Joe. “Fine little lad you have, sir.”

Joe smiled back. “Thanks. He’s a handful though. Just like your snake.”

“You can say that again! She’s really unsettled today. Won’t keep still for a minute, bless her.”

“Sounds just like my son.”

Danny bopped him on the arm. “Hey! I’m nothing like a snake. I’m gonna tell Mum on you.”

The crowd laughed again, this time giving a collective “Oooooooooo!” Joe knew his son was just showing off, but it was nice to see him come out of his shell. After the last few years, with the divorce and everything else, it was good to see that Danny had any confidence at all.

Joe rustled Danny’s hair, messing it

up more than it already was. “We best be moving on, little dude, or we won’t fit everything in. Say goodbye to the nice man and his snake.”

Danny twisted his face into a frown, but did as he was told. His shoulders slumped as he spoke. “See ya, Mister. Thanks for letting...Hey Mister...are you okay?”

Joe was alerted by the tone of his son’s voice before he actually saw anything was wrong. The snake handler was writhing around, struggling beneath the weight his huge reptile. It coiled its way around his ribcage and was slithering up toward his neck.

“Step away, Danny.” Joe moved in front of his son, keeping him back from

the wooden barrier that separated the crowd from the lean-to shelter. The slithering reptile had begun to form a noose around its keeper's neck and was slowly tightening with each convulsion of its muscular body. The crowd started to murmur, the first gentle stages of panic taking hold.

The snake handler began to choke and threw out his arms out in desperation. Joe jumped the barrier, dashed toward the shelter just as the struggling man dropped to his knees on the plank-wood flooring. The fragile walls of the bamboo shelter shook beneath the impact.

“Stay calm,” Joe shouted in a voice that was the exact opposite. He reached

out to grab the snake, but recoiled immediately.

Whoa! Do I really wanna put my hands on this thing? Can it bite me? Joe allowed himself to hesitate only a moment longer then gave himself a mental shove. *Come on! There's a man's life at stake. Do something!*

He snatched at the thick reptile and pulled back hard, fighting away revulsion as his fingers made contact with the rough, quivering flesh – cold to the touch. Several seconds of yanking and tugging made no difference. The snake's grip became even tighter. The desperate handler turned a deep purple as the pressure pushed his eyeballs a half-inch out of their sockets, making

them bulge like a squid's. Joe felt a roiling wave of sickness crash through his insides.

I can't do anything. I can't get this thing off of him and he's going to die. I never watched a man die before...

Joe turned to the anxious crowd and checked that his son was nearby. "Don't just stand there!" he shouted at them. "Someone go get help, now! Danny, you stay where you are and close your eyes. Everything is okay." He could tell by his son's fearful expression that he didn't believe it. Moving back around, Joe saw that blood was now trickling from both of the snake handler's nostrils. The beast wrapped around the

man's throat was glaring at Joe, malevolent eyes boring into his flesh. Its forked-tongue flicked back and forth, tasting the air.

People in the crowd started backing away, as if somehow the snake handler's peril was infectious. Some of them scattered immediately, crying out for help as they fled in all directions, while others retreated in silence, unable to take their eyes off the harrowing scene in front of them. Joe didn't go with either group. He was rooted to the spot.

Locked in a death stare with a nine-foot Boa Constrictor.

“Dad!”

The sound of Danny's voice allowed Joe to regain control of his

senses. He turned around to find that his son had approached the wooden barrier and was about to crouch underneath it. Joe flung out an arm and shouted. “Stay there! I’ll handle th-”

From the corner of his eye, Joe sensed the movement of the snake, and turned just in time to see it strike. The adrenaline in his body pumped his reactions just enough that he was able to lunge aside of the attack, a mere split-second before the murderous reptile sliced its fangs through the air. The snake handler flopped face down on the floor, the boa constrictor slithering out from beneath the body. The man was dead.

“Dad, I’m scared!”

Joe sprang into action, exiting the shelter and vaulting the barrier. He scooped Danny up in his arms and chased after the fleeing crowd. Help still had not arrived, but it hardly mattered anymore now that the snake handler was dead.

Someone still needs to grab that damn snake though.

And then destroy the fucking thing!

Joe kept his lanky strides fast yet steady, not wanting to trip and fall on the unforgiving pavement whilst carrying his son. Blood pounded in his eardrums as, all around him, people scattered in all directions. It was strange to see just *h o w many* people were panicking.

There had been perhaps a dozen men and women at the snake handler's hut, along with a handful of children, but as Joe looked around now, he saw at least three times that many.

So what else is happening? Why are so many people in a hurry to get their asses out of here?

Joe slowed down and eventually stopped, turning to look back where he'd come from. The huge boa constrictor was still inside the lean-to shelter, slithering over the lifeless body of its ex-handler. It was reason enough to panic, for sure, but Joe was certain that only those nearby would have noticed. He looked around the zoo, examining the multiple animal enclosures and exhibit

buildings that lined the grass-edged pathways. A racket was coming from each of them, as if the caged specimens inside were agitated by something. The hoots and howls from the monkey compounds were particularly loud and Joe could see the various primates rattling their bars with unbridled fury. Joe could feel the vibrations in his teeth.

What the hell is happening?

He decided he wouldn't wait around and find out. He needed to make sure his son was safe (from just *what* exactly, he did not know). Danny was rigid in his arms, making no sound other than the wet panting of his breath.

"Everything's going to be okay, Danny," he said soothingly. "Let me get

you somewhere safe and we can sit down and have a Coke.” Joe started moving again, a sense of urgency seizing his internal organs and pumping them like pistons. Some deep-buried instinct told him he needed to get away from the area as quickly as possible. Up ahead was the zoo’s brand-new visitor’s centre, RAVENCROFT ZOOLOGICAL CENTRE AND CONFERENCE SUITES. The lengthy, glass structure’s recent grand opening was advertised all over the park and it looked like as good a place as any to find some authority.

Joe picked up speed, his worn trainers wearing even thinner against the harsh grey cement of the pathway. All around him people were panicking,

scuttling in all directions like frenzied ants. It was still unclear what was causing all of the chaos, but Joe knew it was more than just a snake attack. Something else was happening.

Something bad.

The visitor's centre seemed to grow in size as Joe got closer and he could now make out the large glass doors of its entrance. Several people had already begun to move inside, but a vast majority were running past the building – likely heading towards the car park beyond. Joe wondered whether that idea was a good one.

I just want to get indoors. I don't know what's going on yet, but I know that a load of people panicking in their

cars is gonna have a bad ending.

Joe broke off from the crowd and approached the visitor centre, hopping up a set of brick steps that joined with a landscaped patio at the front of the building. A middle-aged Black man with grey sideburns was standing amongst the potted trees and plants. He quickly moved aside when he saw he was in Joe's way. Joe nodded 'thank you' to the man before moving through the building's wide-open double-doors.

The fluorescent lights inside dazzled Joe as he left the bleak greyness of outside. The first thing his eyes finally managed to focus on was a large rectangular sign hanging from the ceiling. It declared the room to be THE

EDUCATION HALL. The area was full of life-like exhibits of elephants, alligators, and many other creatures – each of them staring into the centre of the room with their soulless glass eyes. There were several other people inside the hall with Joe. Each of them looked as concerned and freaked out as he was. There was only a single zoo employee amongst them, given away by his bright-green waist-jacket against a khaki-coloured uniform. He wore the tatty, round spectacles of an intellectual man, and his neatly-combed grey hair only added to that impression. He looked as dumfounded as everyone else, but Joe still considered him the best person to speak to.

Nearby, several plush, cube-shaped chairs of varying colours were arranged in front of a wide plasma screen. Joe eased Danny down onto a purple one. “Just wait here one sec, little dude, okay?”

Danny nodded obediently and sat still.

Joe examined the boy for a few moments, saw how frightened he was, and then kissed his forehead. “I’m proud of you, Danny.”

The zoo employee had moved over to the far wall of the hall and was fiddling with a bright yellow, rubber-cased walkie-talkie. It didn’t seem like the man was having any success in gaining information, and his wrinkled

brow gave away his frustrations. Joe approached slowly, trying to seem calm rather than agitated, somehow feeling that rationality would be at a premium right now.

When he got close enough, the zoo keeper looked up from the radio. “Sir, may I help you?”

“Hello,” Joe replied. “Do you know what’s going on?”

The man shook his head and his spectacles jittered on the bridge of his long nose. He readjusted them before speaking. “Not the foggiest, I’m afraid. I can’t reach any of the zoo keepers to find out. A couple of the visitors I’ve spoken to have mentioned animal attacks, but they were too distressed to

provide details. Seems unlikely, though.”

Joe thought about the snake attack. “You don’t think an animal attack is possible?”

“Possible yes, but extremely unlikely. The enclosures are secure and the staff are dedicated, experienced professionals. There’s never been an incident of such a kind in the seven years I’ve worked here.”

“Sorry to disagree,” Joe said, “but I just watched a large snake kill one of your staff about ten minutes ago, over by the World of Venom building – a boa constrictor, I think. It squeezed him to death in front of a dozen people.”

The man’s face dropped. “Terry?”

I pray that you are mistaken, sir, I truly do. Terry has been with us many years and loved Betsy a great deal.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “Betsy?”

“Yes, Betsy. She is the zoo’s Pearl Island Boa. She’s always been extremely gentle. I can’t believe she would ever attack anyone – least of all Terry. They had a...bond, for want of a better word.”

Joe nodded. He didn’t want to upset the man further, but thought he needed to wake up to whatever was happening. “Maybe he’s okay,” Joe supposed. “It did all happen suddenly.”

The other man thought about things for a moment and his expression seemed to get grimmer with each passing

second. Finally, he looked back up at Joe and said, “I believe you. It doesn’t seem like you’re lying, and I see no reason why you would. Something is obviously going on, but I just cannot fathom the idea that any of our animals would attack their handlers. There are too many precautions.”

“Look, I don’t mean to be impatient, but you’re the only representative of the zoo I could find. You need to do something.”

“And what exactly would you have me do? I am a *curator*, not a crowd controller.”

Joe sighed. “Nevertheless, you have a responsibility.”

The man looked at Joe for several

seconds before replying. “I suppose you’re right. I should find out what’s going on.” He pushed Joe aside, headed for the front of the hall, and spoke over his shoulder as he went. “I still don’t believe things are as bad as people are-”

Joe turned around to see why the curator had stopped mid-sentence. He could hardly believe his eyes as people started to scream. Four lions blocked the far entrance to the visitor’s centre and were snarling at the people inside. Each of their fangs was the size of a tent peg and syrupy-thick blood dripped from their jaws.

Joe had a feeling that he was about to have a very bad day.